Kizuna Hikari

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Kizuna Hikari

by YoungAndOverIntelligent

Summary

The only reason Sasuke keeps coming back to Konoha is because of that mattress. The bed is his only respite. And perhaps the dumbass who owns said bed might be worth it, too.

Or, another canon divergence 699 that showers Sasuke with too much (deserved) love and attention that we all need for these unprecedented times.

Title means "Bonded Light". It'll make sense when you're about 100K in.

Notes

follow me on tumblr @ sasubaeuchithot !!!! i love answering asks lol

edited by the lovely drschwartz19 on tumblr, who also wanted me to make some changes to these notes!

i spent a lot of time as i was writing this researching the lore of this show and trying to make things as canon as possible. after half of a year of originally posting this and getting tons of super nice comments, I feel pretty confident with it!

hope you enjoy!!

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_o-O-o_

The first night only happened because he was delirious. His good arm was bleeding profusely, as was his left ear from the impact his head made against the earth. Of course he would be fine, Sasuke had known that at the time, but he *had* sustained a brain injury. Really, the fight hadn't been anything to write home about (not that Sasuke had a home, anyway); there were just a few rogue shinobi who thought they could get the better of him and a kunoichi who did. Not for long, though, but she had managed to give him the concussion. Nothing more than a bother, really.

It was a mere coincidence that he was so close to Konoha; there was no avoiding it if you wanted to take the fastest route from Lightning to Wind territory, much to his chagrin. Sasuke cursed under his breath as he used what remaining chakra he could spare to teleport to the other side of the wall, having no intentions of making it known that he was stopping in on his childhood village. It was hard to focus in on making rational decisions. The only thing he could do was try to follow his inner mantra of *not Sakura's, not Sakura's*.

Of all the grandeurs the citizens of Konoha might have of what their Great Shinobi Hero would be doing in the middle of the night on a weekend, in actuality he was eating cup ramen on his bed in the same old ratted pajamas he always wore. Typical. Sasuke should have expected it from Naruto, though the fact that it was at two in the morning was a bit concerning.

A random body smashes through his bedroom window and all that idiot could do was point his chopsticks and gape. What kind of ninja even was he? "Oi!? Sasuke?!" he yelled way too loudly for the hour, and for Sasuke's current condition.

"Don't wake up the town, dumbass," Sasuke bit at him, fighting the urge to collapse. His head was whirling.

"What are you doing here?!" Naruto replied, his voice still earsplitting. Scoffing, Sasuke ignored the question and made to walk past him toward the bathroom. It wasn't until he stumbled around the bed that Naruto proclaimed, "Sasuke! You're hurt!" Astute as ever. He had an urge to backtrack his steps just so that he could give the idiot a deserving smack over the head. Instead, he continued his trek to the bathroom. There were footsteps coming from behind, signaling that Naruto's presence was following him. Sasuke flipped the light switch before yanking the medicine cabinet behind the mirror open.

Which was empty.

"That *opens*?!"

Maybe he *should* have gone to Sakura's.

A vein in Sasuke's forehead felt like it was about to burst. "Where's your first aid?"

“Under there,” Naruto all but mumbled, chopsticks dangling from his mouth, because of course he was still eating. He had gestured to the cabinets under the sink. Sasuke retrieved a roll of bandage. It was only then that it dawned on him that he had bandage on a scroll in his pack, of course he did, he carried first aid on him everywhere he went. Damn concussion. “You’re bleeding from your ear, Sasuke,” Naruto remarked, only just now noticing.

“Shut up.” As if he was *unaware* of the fact that he was bleeding from his ear. He’d get to that. First, he had to wrap up the gash on his arm. Letting his cloak fall to the tiled floor, Sasuke dampened a small ball of cotton with antiseptic. He understood the problem at hand a little too late. He couldn’t reach the spot on his arm where that woman had managed to slice him. The damn concussion made him *forget* that he was missing a limb. Head injuries were ridiculous. Contemplating if he’d be able to reach it with the cotton ball between his teeth, Sasuke made an attempt to get what he could of the blood a few times before Naruto could catch on to the dilemma.

Frowning, Naruto stole the cotton from him. “You really should have let Baa-chan make you a new arm,” he commented plainly, beginning to dab away the blood, only to have more gush over. “Oi, this is a lot of blood.”

“You’ve gotta put pressure on it, dumbass,” Sasuke scolded as his head continued to sway. Naruto’s incompetence was doing nothing to help his pounding migraine.

“I know *that*,” he defended, his proclamation falling apart under him as he only then started to apply pressure. After the bulk of the blood was wiped away, Sasuke was able to assess that the cut was nothing. Not for his line of work. “Hold on, wait,” Naruto said almost absently before concentrating his red chakra onto his hand. He placed it over the cut, and the Kyuubi’s chakra burned at the gash, mending it slightly. There was still a cut that needed to be wrapped, so Naruto did it for him, Sasuke unable to make the derogatory comments about it that it deserved due to the fact that he was starting to feel nauseous.

Just as a cold dampness touched his neck, Sasuke snatched the new cotton ball from where Naruto had begun to clean the blood from his ear. “I can do this myself.” He didn’t think the Kyuubi’s chakra would do much to help the brain injury he had sustained.

A familiar childish pout appeared on Naruto’s lips, crossing his arms over his chest. “You’re gunna open the cut back up again if you keep using that arm.”

“It hasn’t even been properly closed, with how loosely you wrapped it.” Sasuke bit coldly, utilizing the mirror to help him wipe the lines of blood. Naruto stayed quiet. Thankfully. In the mirror, Sasuke could recognize what his overly dilated pupils meant. Exhaustion. Nausea. Amnesia. Textbook concussion.

Too focused on trying to figure out what he was going to do, Sasuke didn’t feel Naruto getting so close. “Hey, Sasuke, maybe you should bunker down here for the night, you think?”

It appeared that it was the only option he had. It wasn’t ideal; being in this village made him tetchy. “I’m leaving in the morning,” he turned around, attempting to exit the bathroom. As

he spun, so did the rest of the room. He had only just managed to steady himself on the sink in time to keep upright.

“Do you have a concussion?” Naruto asked.

Sasuke scoffed. “Dumbass.”

Grumbling, Naruto narrowed his eyes. “Why didn’t you go to Sakura’s? She’d be able to heal that for you in an instant.”

Sasuke’s eyes flashed to him, trying to find the source of Naruto’s stupidity to glare at, making him startle at the intense look. Normally he wouldn’t have answered that question, but as things stood, Sasuke figured he should make it clear, “It’s better that she doesn’t know I’m in town. So don’t tell her I was here.”

Flapping his free hand as if nonchalant, Naruto assured in the most flippant tone, “Alright, alright. I won’t.” Unconvinced, Sasuke increased his glare as Naruto scratched the back of his head. “No one’s seen you in three months, Sasuke; what have you been doing? It’s been boring as hell here.”

Clenching his jaw, he turned back to the mirror to see if there were any more spots of blood to wipe up. “I’m on a mission.”

Just like that, Naruto became excited, “Oh, ooohhh, Kakashi didn’t tell us that! Tell me what it’s about!”

“Kakashi didn’t give it to me,” Sasuke dismissed.

Sasuke wasn’t sure what he expected out of Naruto from that, but it certainly wasn’t his subdued, “You’re still trying to atone, right?”

It made him stop, just for a moment. Damn concussion. That kind of intuition from Naruto was out-of-character from the Naruto that Sasuke was used to. Logically Naruto had grown, but it was still hard for him to face. Why was he even humoring him with this conversation? ‘Atone’. It felt gross to use that word, because that wasn’t what he was doing. At least not anymore. He gave a disgruntled hum to brush the emotion away. To Sasuke’s exasperation, Naruto smacked a hand down on his left shoulder, surprisingly mindful that his right would be sore. He turned to see that big, dopey grin, accompanied by a campy thumbs-up. It felt like a splintered blade had pierced his chest, with Naruto so close, so he turned away quickly. “I need to rest.”

“Oh yeah! You should do that,” Naruto’s face fell into one of deep concentration, animatedly tapping his chin. “I don’t really have another bed for you to sleep on. But my bed’s big enough now that two people can sleep on it! Even though I don’t have anyone to share it with, usually.” Sasuke’s best course of action probably should have been to stumble into Kakashi’s place, Hokage or not, he now realized. But then the thought of suffering under his old teacher’s guilt trips for an entire night made him glad he didn’t. He would probably tell the whole village just to try to get him to stay longer. And what should it matter, sleeping on the same bed as Naruto, anyway? “Er, I mean- that sounded dirty, I meant-”

"*Naruto*," Sasuke said as quick as he could. "I don't care." He left the bathroom, scooping up his cloak and hanging it on the coat hanger by Naruto's door, finally kicking off his shoes. It was rude of him to have not taken them off before coming in, but his damn concussion made him forget. Naruto wasn't the type to care that it took him so long, anyway. He made his way over to the bed, doing his best to ignore how the room around him was tilting drunkenly.

Following him, Naruto had a light blush dusted over his nose, making the lines on his cheeks seem slightly more pronounced in contrast. "Er, right. Haha!" Sasuke stopped in his tracks a few feet from the ruffled bed, staring at the out of place blankets on top and the two discolored pillows. He didn't think he truly wanted to know the answer, but Sasuke had to ask, "When's the last time you washed your sheets?"

Affronted, Naruto replied, "I *just* washed them last month!"

He shouldn't have asked.

"Whatever," Sasuke shook the thought from his mind. He'd be fine. Trying to not think about it, Sasuke slipped into Naruto's bed.

He hadn't known at the time to anticipate anything special about it. It was a bed, and he had been foolishly more concerned with the unhygienic look of it.

He was naïve.

The mattress was so soft that he fell a couple of inches into it. It was the most peculiar feeling. He spared a moment of curiosity from it. His body felt like it was being cradled, which was a new sensation. Assessing it for a second, Sasuke could feel the tenseness of his battle ebbing away to the point of dizziness. But perhaps the dizziness was the concussion... "Make sure to wake me up in two hours," he called, though he knew it wouldn't be necessary. It didn't matter how comfortable this bed was; he hadn't slept more than four hours at a time in years now.

"Yeah, yeah," Naruto waved.

As he pulled the blanket over him, the only thought in his mind was about how it was even possible for a bed to *be* this comfortable, an internal sentence that trailed off midway through the thought.

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The room was stifling in the afternoon heat. The sun streaming through the windows felt as if… The realization had Sasuke's eyes popping open within seconds, bolting upright in a flash of anger. He took a moment to make sense of his surroundings; he had fallen asleep the instant he shut his eyes. With the way he suddenly woke up, it felt like no time had passed at all, as if the sun had instantaneously popped up in the center of the sky in a mere blink.

Naruto was perched on the side edge of the bed, sitting cross-legged as he watched something on the tiny television screen on the opposite side of the room. He had a pair of chopsticks in

his mouth and another empty cup ramen on his knee, adding to the illusion that no time had passed. He cheerily called, “Hey, good afternoon, Sasuke!”

“After- what time is it?!” Sasuke screeched.

“Just after one,” Naruto proclaimed.

One o’clock? In the *afternoon*? Sasuke was struck dumb. He had been asleep for… ten hours? Eleven? Without even a dream? That was *impossible*. But the sun was so high in the sky; it had to be true. Somehow, he had managed to evade his insomnia last night. But ho-? He remembered his concussion. Seething, Sasuke reached forward to fist the front of Naruto’s jacket tightly. “You were supposed to wake me up after two hours, dumbass!”

Jostled, Naruto raised both hands in sheepish defeat. “You were sleeping so peacefully; I didn’t want to disturb you. Besides, I fell asleep, too.”

“You-” Sasuke could barely look at him, with the amount of anger he had. He breathed through it, managing to say through clenched teeth, “You can’t let someone with a concussion go into a REM cycle. I could have fallen into a *coma*.” Was that what happened? Had Sasuke been in a *coma*? Was that how he managed to get the best sleep since… childhood? Surely that must have been what had happened. He had fallen asleep so inhumanly quickly, as if that soft bed had devoured him the minute he laid down. But the idea that it had been the *bed* that made him so comfortable that he slept for eleven hours was outrageous. He *must* have fallen into a coma.

Sasuke watched as the information donned on Naruto, stirring up an old memory he had to have had where he learned the *basic* fact of first aid to not let a person with a concussion sleep for too long. “Ah, right, sorry, sorry. I just figured that you could probably use a bit of rest, is all.” Scoffing, Sasuke let his grip at Naruto’s throat fall. What did he expect? Next time, he’d have to remember to be clearer with the urgency of his instructions, no matter how much it might seem like common sense, or how unnecessary he thought it would be to have to. He tossed the blanket off of him and swung his legs over the side of the bed, stomping his way across the room. “Oh? Are you leaving?”

Resisting the urge to growl, Sasuke bit, “I was *supposed* to leave first thing this morning.” He snatched his cloak and shoes. As he made his way back to the window behind the bed, intending to leave the way he came, he stopped. Naruto must have trained this morning. “Did you tell anyone I was here?”

Naruto seemed to grow small at the way he asked the question, a blush coming to his cheeks. Good. As he picked his chin, he admitted, “Just Hinata. She… ran into me.”

Just as hot air filled his senses, Sasuke paused for a moment. “Who’s Hinata?”

Naruto blinked at him. “Hinata Hyuuga? Uh, the shy girl on Team 10. She was in our academy class, but she’s like, really quiet.”

It didn’t ring a bell. A Hyuuga? And Sasuke didn’t know of her? Sasuke brushed it aside. “Whatever. I told you not to tell anyone!”

“You told me not to tell Sakura-chan!”

“If you tell random people, Sakura’s *bound* to find out!”

Frowning in indignation, Naruto floundered his arms around grandly. “Well, you have to be more specific! How am I supposed to know to not tell Hinata when you just said not to tell Sakura-chan?” He pouted again, crossing his arms. “It’s like you don’t want anyone to know you’re here.”

“I *don’t*,” Sasuke snapped. He pinched his eyes closed, forcing himself to take a breath.

Naruto’s confused frown pulled deeper. “Not even Kakashi-sensei?”

“*Especially* not Kakashi.”

Grumbling, Naruto rubbed the back of his head, “Man, Sasuke, we all *want* to see you, you know?”

Frustrated, Sasuke conceded that he needed to spell it out for him. “I don’t want anyone to know I’m *here* when I’m not *staying*.”

Curiously, Naruto didn’t ask it out loud, but Sasuke still felt that knife in his chest again at the question that was in the air floating around that blond head. It was made worse when a light blush came to Naruto’s cheeks as he looked away, “We haven’t been able to hang out at all. I want to go on missions with you again. And train. I want to learn that Fire Style. Do you think you could teach me?”

Clenching his fist, Sasuke glared at the opposite wall, striding past Naruto toward the window. For some reason, the window seemed like a much more viable exit for him than the porch door. Or the front door- he definitely would not use the front door. He had entered through the window in secret, so in secret through the window he would exit. He answered the unsaid question, the one he knew Naruto actually wanted to ask, but for some reason hadn’t. “I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

He had every intent of leaving there, having thrown the window open, but Naruto grabbed his cloak. “Wait- Sasuke,” Sasuke paused, waiting to hear whatever else it was that Naruto was planning on trying to pierce him with. “I’m sorry. I won’t tell anyone you came. And I’ll tell Hinata to keep it a secret, too.” He thought about his words for a moment before adding, “Though I doubt she would say anything. She’s really quiet.”

Sasuke had expected that gravelling would come, but it didn’t. The hand pulling his cloak taut dropped, the fabric floating down.

“Good luck on your mission,” was all he offered.

They were parting words that he didn’t want to tempt, so Sasuke managed to mumble a “Thanks,” before disappearing out of the window.

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Despite himself, over the next few weeks Sasuke couldn't stop thinking about that sleep he had while concussed in Naruto's bed. *Had* he fallen into a coma? He really didn't think so, but what else could it have been? After a few days of internal struggle, he finally knew why he must have been able to sleep so well: it was the first proper bed he had slept on in *months*. With how much he had been traveling, he'd been camping out in caves or finding the driest hollowed tree. He didn't want to admit how refreshed he had felt on that next day, but at three in the morning two weeks later with his back pressed against a damp cave wall, he began to long for it- which was strange, because he hardly had a memory of it, with how quickly he fell asleep.

His curiosity plagued him. There was no way for him to figure it out. After a week hiding out in a small town in Wind territory, he found his way back into Fire, lying to himself the entire way about why he was doing it. He made it all of the way to Konoha's gates before he had to confront himself about his intentions.

He couldn't spoil himself with something like that. It had been a coma; that was why he had slept so well. So he found a neighboring little town to fish around in for a few days so as not to make the trip useless. He didn't like staying at inns for fear of someone noticing him, even though he did not have a warrant for his arrest anymore in Fire, but he did attempt to use one just to see if lying on a bed would help on one of the nights. No such luck. He lay with his eyes open for half of the night. It *must* have been the concussion, knocking him into the first full sleep in months, he thought to himself as he rolled onto his other side on the firm mattress. It couldn't possibly have been anything else. Naruto's bed couldn't have been comfortable enough to cure his insomnia. There was no reason to be going back toward Konoha just for one night of sleep.

…But he wondered if it was time to check back in with Kakashi in case he missed any messages from him.

So he found himself bypassing Konoha's walls again late one evening as the sun set into twilight. Kakashi appeared glad to see him, in that airy, Kakashi-way that held a deeper sentiment that he was being chastised for having been away for so long. There weren't any missions Sasuke missed in transit, so Kakashi leaned in, propped back against his desk. "How about we get something to eat? My treat."

There must have been some desperation to it if Kakashi had actually offered to pay. "No," Sasuke declined. "I'm not hungry."

"Hey, come on, Sasuke," Kakashi urged, coming forward to lay his arm across Sasuke's shoulders. This was a strange thing for him to do, and Sasuke clocked its true intentions immediately; they had a silent agreement that their relationship could be one without physical contact, as neither of them typically enjoyed being touched. They each had a very small number of people that it was okay to be physically affectionate with, and thankfully did not have to pretend that they actually liked it with one another. They only enjoyed physical contact with people they loved, and their complicated relationship combined with their shared general distaste of touch was not enough to overshadow whatever emotions they did have for one another. So Sasuke knew he was just using it as an excuse to push him out the door. "It's only polite to take your boss up on his offer to take you out for a dinner."

'Boss'. What a joke. Sasuke squinted at him, "Don't say it like that." But Kakashi was dragging him out.

Thankful for the long hood he had over his head, Sasuke ducked his face under its guise of darkness as he was pulled through the streets of his old home village. Well, reconstructed home village. It looked both eerily exactly the same and disturbingly very different from what had been destroyed a few years ago. It was dark, now, but the shops and restaurants had their lights on, still open for another few hours. Kakashi led him to some restaurant, one that must be new because Sasuke had never heard of it. Come to think of it, he thought with a pang, that didn't mean it was new.

Just as they came to the door, Sasuke caught view of two familiar faces out of his peripherals. Two of his old classmates, Ino and Shikamaru, were coming down the road, chatting animatedly about something. He saw the way Kakashi was momentarily distracted by their presence and used that second to make his getaway.

With the help of his Rinnegan, Sasuke was on the other side of town, switching places with any object he could. He hoped his chakra usage had not been for waste- but it was, of course, so long as Kakashi had that damn nose of his. A soft whoosh signaled that Kakashi was beside him, because of course he was. Sasuke pulled his hood further over his face, doing his best to hide how winded he was from using that jutsu. Kakashi sighed heavily, "My, my, Sasuke, are you bailing on me so soon?"

Grinding his teeth, Sasuke schooled his expression. "Don't tell Sakura I was here."

"Because you want to tell her the news yourself, right?" He goaded back in the most presumptuously cheery voice he had, smiling dangerously behind his mask. A hand came precariously close to Sasuke's shoulder. "Come on, Sasuke, we-"

Sasuke batted the hand before it touched him, furious that Kakashi had attempted more physical contact to disguise his true motives. "Send my hawk if any more missions come up."

And he disappeared again.

He waited a few minutes at his new destination, surveying the area for any sign of having been followed again. When he was sure he was safe, he made his way on foot over to Naruto's apartment, staking out for a moment. The lights were on, and he could see a bright figure combing through the dresser. Sasuke eyed the porch door, then headed for the window again. Sliding it open, Sasuke rolled his eyes at the way Naruto proclaimed, "Sasuke!" as he climbed in. "Are you bleeding again?" he asked, eyes raking over Sasuke's perfectly uninjured form.

Sasuke ignored him in favor of removing his shoes and cloak by the front door. "Do you have any food?" he asked, and then quickly turned around to emphasize, "That *isn't* ramen?"

"I- uhhh," he drawled the sound out, contemplating. "Ah, yeah! I have rice!" he ran into the kitchen, pulling out a small bag of rice with enough to make maybe two portions. He held the bag out proudly.

Deadpanning, Sasuke inquired, “Anything else?”

Naruto hummed for a moment before opening up the desolate fridge, staring at the milk carton and three condiment bottles. “Nope.”

Of course not. Sasuke reached into his hip pack and pulled out some money, shoving it into Naruto’s hand. “Go out and by a vegetable, any vegetable. And meat.” He turned away before he could see the dumb expression that must have come over Naruto’s face in favor of finding something to wash the rice in.

“Ehh?” Naruto proclaimed. “You want me to do your shopping?!”

“Just shut up and go,” he instructed with irritation, keeping his back turned. Eventually, he heard Naruto shuffle around and leave, albeit his muttering.

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He had just gotten out of a quick bath when Naruto returned, bag in hand. Sasuke wordlessly checked its contents: peppers, a few tomatoes, and a package of beef that could be cut up. He breathed out a sigh of relief that Naruto was competent enough to have not returned with something stupid. It would have been Sasuke’s own fault for being vague. As he set to work cooking, Naruto sat at the table and watched. Of course, he started talking.

He was slumped down on the table, resting his chin on his folded arms. “Do you not want anyone to know you’re here again this time?”

Sending him a glare, Sasuke continued his quick work of slicing the peppers. “What do you think.”

Naruto’s voice was almost inaudible with the way he pursed his lips. “I think you need to get over yourself and see your friends.”

He had only barely stopped himself from stabbing the knife through the cutting board. Friends. Like Sasuke was *friends* with anyone else in this village besides Naruto. As a response, he flashed his eyes back to the only person he considered a friend, who tensed up, apparently having thought that he had said that low enough for Sasuke to not hear. Something about Naruto’s panicked look softened him. He sighed, “I’m here with you, aren’t I?”

He shouldn’t have said that, judging by the way Naruto perked his head up, a dumb grin on his lips. “Hey, yeah!” Feeling a weight settle into his stomach, Sasuke turned back to his cooking. “So what have you been up to? Anything exciting?”

Shrugging, Sasuke tossed the vegetables in the pan over the meat. “I went to Suna.”

“Oh really? I was almost sent on a mission there! They cancelled it though. Turns out it wasn’t needed,” Naruto commented.

“It’s pretty quiet over there right now. A lot of construction.” That set Naruto off on a story, explaining what the mission would have entailed, and how he was instructed instead to focus

on studying to retake his Chunin exam. Sasuke winced as he lamented about wanting to visit Gaara again.

Naruto kept up the chatter as Sasuke finished cooking, and he found himself thankful for it. If there was one thing Naruto was good at, it was filling in the silence. Not that Sasuke minded silence; in fact, he usually preferred it. But it was nice to listen to him prattle, despite how much he would never admit it. Choosing to eat as he leaned against the counter instead of joining Naruto at the table, Sasuke felt safe adding next to nothing to the conversation. Naruto didn't mention it, nor did he seem to mind. The food was pretty bland, as Naruto had very little spices to work with, but it was warm and comforting to eat something that was cooked on a stovetop instead of over a fire in the middle of the woods. As Sasuke was finishing the last bite, Naruto got quiet, asking, "Are you sleeping over again?"

Sasuke set his bowl down on the counter, taking a moment before answering back with an equally quiet, "I guess." Best to let Naruto think he hadn't specifically planned his whole visit on staying over.

"Alright!" Naruto cheered, the pep back in his voice. "I can wake you up early if you want me to, this time."

…That would completely ruin the entire point of Sasuke having come to the village. Well, no, he had come to see if Kakashi had any missions for him. But now that he was *here*, and he didn't have anything else to do, or anywhere else to go, it would be worthwhile for Sasuke to quell his minor curiosities of that bed, wouldn't it? He would not let himself blush as he responded, turning around to start cleaning up his dishes. "I don't have anywhere to be." At the inquisitive noise Naruto made in response, Sasuke was quick to correct himself. "In the morning, that is. I'm leaving town in the afternoon."

"No way!" Naruto proclaimed animatedly. "So we can train together in the morning, right, Sasuke?!"

Shit. He tried not to groan at the corner he just put himself in. "I guess…"

"Alright!" he stood up and was now punching the air. "I won't let you go easy on me! I'll learn that Fireball Jutsu by noon, mark my words!"

Sasuke squinted at him. "Do you even have a Fire Nature? It'll oppose your Wind Nature and make it almost impossible to learn without."

Naruto widened his grin, "Kakashi-sensei said that it'll be easier if I use Kurama's chakra! I think that'll be the best way to learn it, because Kurama has a Fire Nature. But I haven't been able to do it yet. And if I'm gunna learn it, I should learn it from the best, shouldn't I?" Suddenly, an arm wrapped itself over Sasuke's shoulder, which was so, so different from the facade he had gotten from Kakashi earlier. He could feel Naruto pressed up along his back, smiling over at him, hopeful.

He did his best to not be so hyperaware of the contact, but try as he might he could feel every cell in his body reacting to the touch. It was strange to be touched and not hate it. Naruto was the only person alive that Sasuke didn't mind it coming from. He angled his face away from

him. "…Fine." Elated, Naruto broke off of him to cheer loudly, smacking the back of Sasuke's shoulder blade as he went.

Then to Sasuke's horror, Naruto gloated, "Alright! We'll wake up first thing in the morning!" All Sasuke could do was stare in dismay at the place Naruto had just vacated as he left toward the bedroom.

As Sasuke finished washing the dishes, he scrambled for any way he could convince Naruto to let him sleep in. Not that it would matter, anyway, because Sasuke probably wouldn't be able to actually sleep, because he wasn't concussed. But if there was a possibility of getting even a few more hours than usual, Sasuke should try for it, shouldn't he? If he had known prior to coming this would be an issue… maybe he should have showed up faking another injury. Or sickness. He paused subconsciously as he thought this, recognizing its absurdity for what it was. Not that he wouldn't have come, but that he would really fake weakness for a potential better night's sleep than usual. Was he that desperate?

"Do you want something comfortable to wear?" Naruto interrupted his train of thought, catching him off-guard. He was holding out a pair of soft pajama bottoms and a loose-fitting black t-shirt.

Sasuke eyed them warily. "When was the last time they were washed?"

"Oi, they're clean!" Sighing heavily, Sasuke snatched them from Naruto's outstretched hand as he made his way to the bathroom.

When he put them on, he noticed that they smelled like Naruto, which was… something. Not a bad smell. Naruto wasn't always the cleanest person- or ever- but he wasn't *foul*. The clothes were warm and soft, and the smell was… well, it would be nice to sleep in something other than his day clothes for once. That combined with the prospect of that bed… maybe he *would* be able to sleep.

With his clothes changed, teeth brushed, and freshly washed hair mostly dry, Sasuke wasted no time heading toward the bed. He paused only for a moment at the front of the room. Naruto was already lying in it on the side away from the wall. He would glare, but it was Naruto's bed, after all. He knew that Naruto had slept next to him the other week, and it's not like it bothered him, really, but he didn't have any memory of it with how he had fallen asleep so quickly.

So he walked the narrow strip on the other side of the bed and slipped under the blankets, making sure to face the wall. He was prepared this time, but he was still surprised by the softness that immediately enveloped him. The bed was big enough for the two of them on a technicality, but Sasuke could still feel the warmth of a body radiating next to him.

Just as Sasuke shut his eyes, Naruto's grating voice disturbed his peace. "Bright and early, right Sasuke?"

Eyes flying open, Sasuke glared at the wall. "No," he said before logic was able to kick in, brain too muddled by how comfortable he felt.

“No?” he could hear the pout in Naruto’s voice.

Shit. Well. Anyway, who cares? “If you wake me up at sunrise, I’ll demonstrate the Fireball Jutsu,” he turned over to make sure his point was met by glowering at him, “immediately.” Judging by the way Naruto blanched, he caught his drift.

Sasuke rolled back over and fell victim to the most comfortable bed he had ever been in.

_o-O-o_

“*Sasuke*!”

He was being poked on his side. With his superior reflexes, Sasuke snatched the offending hand by the wrist, rolling over to send waves of murder at its owner. His sleep had been dreamless again, and he knew had just been the most comfortable he ever was moments prior to its intrusion, despite having been unconscious.

Naruto had the sense to be meek, at least, hunching his shoulders in fear as he whispered, “The sun’s been up for hours. We’re not gunna get any training done!” What happened to the Naruto who used to show up to their early training sessions like the undead? Who *was* this? Whatever expression was on Sasuke’s face had Naruto cowering, saying in a low whisper “Ah, okay. I’ll give you another ten minutes…”

Sasuke dropped the hand and rolled back over, eyelids drooping shut. Having now been awoken, he didn’t think he would be able to fall asleep again, but he marveled in the comfort regardless. The mattress was perfectly plush- something Sasuke had never considered before as a bedding option, for some reason. He had only ever known firm mattresses, or the thin futons he would sleep on in his youth on special nights with his brother when they would sleep on their porch. So used to forest floors and cave walls, this luxuriousness felt almost sinful. He could hardly believe it, but this bed had indeed given him a full night’s sleep. There was no brain injury this time to excuse it on. If Naruto hadn’t woken him, how much longer would he have slept?

It wouldn’t be good of him to waste his day in this bed, though. He allotted himself five minutes, and too soon after he made that vow he was emerging from it, spewing expletives at himself.

Naruto was sulking in the kitchen, though he perked up at the sight of Sasuke. He grabbed a tray of rice balls, all different varieties, and held them up for him to see. “I got onigiri! You like them, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Sasuke managed to say, reaching out to grab one, but Naruto pulled them back.

“We can eat them on the way!”

A half hour later, Sasuke watched Naruto on the pier on the lake where he had spent all those hours mastering this exact jutsu over a decade ago. He leaned back against the grassy hill and ate a few rice balls, overviewing Naruto as he figured out the technique, blowing his fire over the water.

He managed a puff of fire no larger than a softball after fifty minutes. Chastising him, Sasuke leaned back against the grass. “Hold the chakra in your throat longer. Let it condense.” Frowning at him, Naruto turned around, forming the hand signs quickly. Sasuke watched as he puffed his chest greatly on the intake of breath, holding it for up damn near twenty seconds before letting it loose. It was about the size of a kickball. “I guess you can just ask your opponent to hold still,” he taunted.

“You said this jutsu was easy!” Naruto whined.

“It is,” Sasuke dismissed. “For an Uchiha. I mastered it when I was seven.” Though, to be fair, Naruto technically did not have a Fire Nature, the Kyuubi did. Even without the technicality, if Naruto’s natural Chakra Nature was Wind, then Fire jutsus would logically be the toughest for him to master.

Squinting at him in indignation, Naruto glared, “I think I just need to use more of Kurama’s chakra.”

“You don’t need to use more chakra.”

But Naruto turned around, still glowering, and preformed the hand signs again. This time, he expelled a massive ball of fire the size of a large boulder. And then promptly collapsed.

Frustrated, Sasuke sat up slightly. “You planning on awakening the Kyuubi every time you wanna use this? Using that much chakra is a sure way to make your own throat explode.” Still, Sasuke couldn’t help but admire the endless supply of energy this kid had. In one move, he expelled the same amount of chakra the average jonin possessed in their entirety. And it was almost an hour into training. Sure, the majority of the chakra escaped without manifesting into fire, but the fact that he could *use* that much without killing himself, while impractical, was still impressive no matter how many times Sasuke witnessed it.

The Great Shinobi Hero seemed oblivious to his own absurdity, however. “I think I burned my throat.”

“What did you expect, dumb-?”

Sasuke was gone the instant he heard the footsteps. Disappeared up into a tree some hundred yards away, having switched places with a loose branch. That was too close. He could make out Sakura from up on the road at the top of the hill. “Naruto? Was that you?”

He sent glares down to Naruto, desperately trying to communicate that now was not the time to be an idiot. Sure enough, though, Naruto floundered around, making it completely obvious to anyone with half of a brain that he was looking around for someone who had just left. “I-uh, Sakura-chan! Good morning!”

“Good morning,” Sakura greeted back, and Sasuke sighed with faint annoyance that she seemed suspicious, as anyone would be. “Were you practicing Fire Style?”

“Oh, I was! I’m still getting the hang of it, though!” He laughed nervously.

Unsure, Sakura began looking around. Sasuke hid further behind his tree. “I could have sworn I heard you talking to someone.”

Naruto laughed loudly. “O-Oh, that? I was just talking to myself! You know, pumping myself up and stuff!” Dumbass. She spotted the tray of half-eaten rice balls. “I-I brought a snack!”

“You ate all of those?”

“W- I- uh. Was giving them out to people. Would you like one?”

Sakura grew quiet, though she gave a soft, “Sure.” Sasuke only ducked completely behind the tree in time for her to fixate on it. Shit. He concealed himself into the trunk, but he knew he would have to be gone the instant she was distracted. He groaned inwardly, knowing he could do nothing but hope Naruto would distract her well enough.

“Uh- Hey, hey! Do you want to see me try it again? I honestly have no clue what I’m doing, but I think I might be using a bit too much chakra! I wish Kakashi-sensei had enough time to teach me how to do it correctly. Having your sensei be the Hokage is actually kind of inconvenient!” He laughed too loudly.

That would have to do. Sasuke fled town at the crescendo of Naruto’s jutsu.

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2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_o-O-o_

The third time Sasuke turned up, Naruto wasn't home. He managed to keep himself busy for a month in Iwagakure and its surrounding towns. The longing for that bed made itself present every night as Sasuke lay awake, feebly attempting whatever pathetic bit of rest he could. Not wanting to become too pampered, Sasuke did his best to ignore this issue. He attempted to find refuge at a few inns, but the mattresses never sufficed. It was almost worse than the cave floors he was used to; at least with solid rock, he knew what he was getting into. It was all for the best, really. Sasuke couldn't let himself become addicted to sleep like that. He needed to learn how to sleep wherever was necessary for his lifestyle. Or at least how to deal with the lack of sleep. Even notwithstanding the false hope of a decent mattress, it was bad for Sasuke to book an inn, anyway, because he had to do it in complete disguise. Iwa had an insane prison system, and Sasuke was determined to never see it firsthand. If any shopkeeper discovered who he was, they'd make decent money turning him in.

A message from Kakashi arrived that assigned him a new mission over in Kiri. The mission was classified, so he needed to stop in Konoha whether he wanted to or not. There was no avoiding it.

Kakashi greeted him, attempting to start a conversation. "Good evening, Sasuke! Have you been well?"

"You have a mission for me," Sasuke noted, going so far as to shut the door behind him, but not coming any further into the room than that. Exasperated, Kakashi humored him by detailing the mission. It was an intel mission, as he had always been assigned. Just another mission gathering data on a few suspicious gatherings. It was beneficial to send Sasuke's single manpower as opposed to a team; it was less likely for Sasuke to get caught, as the gatherings took place in the woods. Sasuke was to avoid any all-out battles, but if suspicions were true then he had to dispose of the threat discreetly. "Do you need me to leave right away?"

"First thing in the morning, if you can," Kakashi said slyly, giving Sasuke an even stare. "Do you have a place to sleep tonight?"

Clenching his jaw, Sasuke rebutted, "I'll manage."

Kakashi stood up from where he had been leaning against his desk to walk around to the other side, shifting aside some paperwork. "Do give Sakura a visit while you're here. She's been quite worried." He let out a quick laugh, as though there was anything to find funny about that, "Even Naruto has stopped mentioning you around her again. Really, it's getting annoying at this point. Do that for me, eh?"

Scoffing, Sasuke made his exit. If he had to spend one night in this village, he wasn't going to spend it at Sakura's. He made his way on rooftop over to Naruto's apartment instead, mind fixated on that bed. Upon arriving, he immediately clocked the dark window. It was too early for Naruto to be asleep.

If it wasn't the only valid entry point for him, Sasuke would discipline Naruto for having such an easy apartment to break into. There wasn't a lock on the window. The porch door was locked, at least, but still. He was really such an incompetent ninja on any aspect that wasn't hand-to-hand combat. Sasuke effortlessly slipped in, taking off his shoes as he sat on the sill and shutting the window behind him. He walked through the dark apartment and deposited his cloak and shoes at the entryway.

Afraid someone would notice the lights on when Naruto wasn't home, Sasuke made himself a regrettable cup of ramen in the dark, having no other option for food, as he filled up the tub. Twenty minutes later, Sasuke found the pajama bottoms and t-shirt from the previous month and was burying himself under the blankets. The bed was more comfortable than his memory had told him. He fell asleep in minutes.

He was startled awake some hours later when the light switched on; the lights had barely disturbed him, but thirty seconds later Naruto's completely unnecessary, "*SASUKE*!!" certainly did.

"Oi!" Sasuke reprimanded, turning over to point sleepy daggers at the source of the obnoxious noise. "I'm sleeping."

This seemed of little concern to Naruto as he hopped onto the bed to sit cross-legged next to him, disturbing Sasuke's comfort. "When did you get here?!"

Groaning inwardly, Sasuke knew that Naruto wasn't planning on being quiet any time soon. He turned back on his side, facing the wall and letting his eyes slide shut again. "A few hours ago."

"Did you come straight here?!"

Sighing, Sasuke gripped the pillow a little tighter, trying to bury his face into it. "I saw Kakashi. I have a mission to get to in the morning."

"Ooh, what's it for?" Naruto asked, excitement overcoming him for a moment before switching to indignation. "I haven't been on a mission in so long! Kakashi-sensei keeps telling me that I have to study. Honestly, the formality of having to take the Chunin exams again is such a pain."

Rolling his eyes open, Sasuke reminded him, "If you become a chunin he'll be able to send you on more missions."

"But *you're* not a chunin!"

Furrowing his brows, Sasuke side eyed him. "And?"

“You get sent on missions!”

“Obviously.”

He could feel Naruto stewing behind him, which was bothersome. More bothersome was when he tried to announce, “Hey! Sasuke! Take the Chunin exams with m-”

“No.”

Honestly. How idiotic. “*Sasuke*!”

Growling, Sasuke rolled over halfway to glare at Naruto in the eyes, “What do I need to be a chunin for?”

Naruto flailed his arms, “What do *I* need to be a chunin for?!” Sasuke deadpanned. Naruto’s shoulders drooped. “Kakashi said he wanted to make me a jonin, but that I have to study first. Then he comes out and tells me I’ve gotta take the Chunin exams, too! Why do I gotta become a chunin if he’s going to make me jonin, anyway? I’m obviously strong enough, but I haven’t been sent on any missions since the war. What’s the point of having proved that I’m the strongest ninja if they don’t utilize me for it?”

Unable to stop himself, Sasuke knocked on Naruto’s head with the back of his fist. It didn’t seem like Naruto was going to let him fall back asleep without this conversation. “It’s *because* you’ve proven yourself as the strongest ninja that they don’t send you on missions, dumbass.” At that, Naruto gave him a look as if he didn’t have a single thought in his brain. Sighing, Sasuke spelled it out for him. “The whole world is in a time of peace, right now. Everything’s quiet. How would it be if Konoha started sending out their greatest weapon into random villages? No matter what mission you actually had, everyone would see it as an act of war. Even if they had you doing escorts, people would think that you must be guarding something worthwhile of meddling with, putting whatever you’re guarding at risk. You’d be stuck with D rank stuff inside the country. But why would they send The *Great Shinobi Hero* to mow someone’s lawn? So Kakashi wants you to make jonin so that he can at least utilize you for guard duty. And the rule is that you have to make chunin first before jonin. Making you jonin without having passed the Chunin exams on his whim would be blatant favoritism on his part. It would be unfair to the entire system.”

That certainly wasn’t all there was to it, though. Those lessons he was taking with Iruka were obviously curated for more than just the foundations of becoming chunin. Kakashi was looking to mold Naruto, to give him the proper training to become the best Hokage the village had ever had. The potential was there, but there was still so much the knucklehead had to learn on the grounds of academic awareness and tactical nuance. Not to mention the politics of it all. Saying that out loud would garner much more energy than Sasuke was currently capable of handling, though, so he didn’t.

He watched as Naruto contemplated this, his explanation seeming to only bring him more confusion. “But he sends *you* on missions!”

Trying not cave into the desire to bash his head against the wall as he turned back over to find comfort again, Sasuke explained, “Because I know how to be discreet. You don’t.”

Offended, Naruto shouted, “Hey! I can be discreet!” He couldn’t stop himself from turning back over to give Naruto an unimpressed look. As if Sasuke would have had to dig around any time he wanted to know where he was for the entire four years he had been away from the village. But he didn’t say that. Naruto could be discreet, but only in those rare, shocking moments of cunning deception in the middle of battle. There was such a difference between Naruto in battle and Naruto in his day-to-day life. He wouldn’t last a whole mission of stealth. Naruto’s head dropped, the same conclusion dawning on him as well. “Ah, it’s just not fair. I’m getting bored! I’m tired of studying!”

“Studying will help you refine your skills,” Sasuke told him.

“Not if I’m too bored to understand a word of it,” Naruto whined. “Hey, you never told me what your mission is for!”

Because you immediately changed the subject. It would be a pointless statement to make, because Naruto wouldn’t even remember that he was the one who jumped immediately onto a different topic. Sighing, Sasuke tempted himself with trying to sleep again, but he wasn’t sure what the point would be if Naruto continued to talk to him. So he sat up. “I obviously can’t tell you.”

“Aww, why not?!” Naruto sat further in with his fists clenched in defiance. “You can tell me that stuff!”

“Because it’s classified A-Rank,” Sasuke scoffed, bringing his right leg up to rest his arm on, creating a barrier between him and Naruto’s liveliness. His whole body was exhausted, like it was screaming at him for waking up.

Bottom lip jutting out, Naruto crossed his arms. “It’s not like I’m gunna tell anyone!”

Rolling his eyes, Sasuke shook his head, “Sure you won’t.”

“I wouldn’t go blabbing that stuff around!”

Dubiously, Sasuke raised an eyebrow. “Oh, you wouldn’t?”

“I’ve kept plenty of secrets!” Naruto pointed a finger in Sasuke’s face, millimeters from his nose. “*You* obviously wouldn’t know of them, because I’ve never told anyone!”

Pulling his nose out of direct danger, Sasuke scoffed. “It’s an intel mission in Kirigakure. That’s all you need to know.”

“…Intel mission?”

Naruto sat quietly, mulling it over. Hopefully that would be enough to quell his curiosity, because Sasuke wasn’t about to give him any more details than that. It wouldn’t do to tarnish his professionalism as a shinobi by letting sensitive data out. Not like his mission was anything juicy at this stage, anyway. It could all be a huge misunderstand-

An arm wrung itself around Sasuke’s neck, pulling him in close. Gasping, Sasuke hardly had time to register the sudden intimacy as Naruto’s face drew in near, perpendicular to his. His

chest was against Sasuke's shoulder, and he was holding his thumb up in front of them. Damn him. He seemed to have only gotten more physically affectionate, something that had been foreign to Sasuke outside of his childhood all those years ago. He was never a big fan of when his auntie would pinch his cheeks, and while he did love his mother's hugs and would marvel any time Itachi would reward him with a touch, that part of his childhood felt too disconnected to him now.

After that day, any physical contact people tried to make with him was nothing but awkward. Sakura insisting on hugging him every time he so much as looked at her, Karin always trying to hang onto his arm. Orochimaru snaking his hand onto his shoulder. More strange girls than he could care to count- or had the stomach to recall. Physical contact should only happen in battle or if it was necessary: carrying someone who was injured, making sure someone who lost their balance didn't fall, taijutsu training. He couldn't understand how it could feel anything but uncomfortable coming from random people.

As it was now, Sasuke's stomach squirmed something foreign, which he thought was worse than how he felt when all of those other people grabbed him. Naruto's eyes were very blue. This was definitely worse.

"We should ask Kakashi-sensei if I can go with you!"

Dumbass.

Sasuke shoved Naruto away from him with a hand to the chest, only able to breathe again after the sound of his body slamming into the floor. Slipping back into his position under the blankets before Naruto could get back up and notice any odd colors on his face, Sasuke warned, "I'm going back to sleep now."

Naruto protested noisily behind him like a toddler throwing a tantrum. Some things never changed.

_o-O-o_

He woke up with the sun feeling completely rested. There was an energy to it that he hadn't felt in years. Naruto was snoring, sprawled out next to him on his stomach. His bandaged right hand had found its way onto Sasuke's chest at some point during the night.

Sasuke was gone ten minutes later.

_o-O-o_

When Sasuke finished his mission after two weeks, he received another message from Kakashi on an urgent call. He wondered if it had something to do with the debriefing of the last mission; there had been the early stages of a small group forming an alliance, but their aim had not been deemed dangerous. Sasuke had assessed their goals and determined that the group was harmless to Konoha and their alliances, but he advised Kakashi to alert the Mizukage of potential criminal activity, should things turn sinister.

Surely if Sasuke had been mistaken, Kakashi would have ordered him to stay in Kiri instead of calling him back. He supposed it just might be coincidence to have two missions presented to him back-to-back during a time of peace, and that he shouldn't complain if the other option was going months without one. He did need the money.

But when he arrived in the Hokage office, he realized how stupid he was to not be suspicious.

The look on Sakura's face as she turned to see him for the first time in months was physically damaging. Sasuke still had his hand on the door, knuckles going white around the knob. "Oi! Sasuke!" Naruto's cheery call was enough to rip Sasuke's panicked eyes off of Sakura's. In his excitement at his arrival, Naruto had jumped off of the Hokage's desk. Kakashi was leaning against the windows, infuriatingly casual.

"Thank you for coming today, Sasuke!" Kakashi said merrily, hand raised in greeting.

In the moments of Sasuke glaring daggers of rage at his old teacher, he hadn't noticed Sakura getting close until she was right in front of him. Awkwardly, Sasuke dropped his gaze. "S-Sakura…"

She was hugging him. He felt like disappearing on the spot, or perhaps making a new sheath for his blade out of Kakashi's entrails. Stomach squirming uncomfortably, Sasuke lamented his distaste of physical contact. Still, he couldn't find it in him to pull away from her. Pity, perhaps. After a few moments of this, he flashed his eyes toward Kakashi. "You said you had an urgent mission for me."

If he had been trying to deny it before, Sasuke definitely knew from the joyous tone that he had been tricked. "Ah, yes I do have a mission for the three of you." Thankfully, Sakura had pulled back at this, but her left hand still clung to his cloak as if the neediness was a subconscious requirement. "The mission I have for you three," he smiled at them all in that way he always did, "is for you to join me for dinner."

"For *DINNER*?!" Naruto screeched Sasuke's disapproval for him. "You told me you were sending me on a real mission!"

"It *is* a real mission," Kakashi assured, holding up a piece of paper and waving it toward them all. "I filled out a form for it and everything. I labeled it as a C-Rank, in case Naruto and Sasuke decide to get hostile again like old times."

Naruto slumped to the ground dramatically, giving a sad "*Kakashi-sensei*," as he went.

"Oh? What's this?" Kakashi teased playfully. "Naruto complaining about getting fed? I'll have to remember that for next time."

That brought the fire back into Naruto's demeanor as he quickly stood up, "Of course I'm not complaining about getting food! But you didn't have to lead me on like that! I really thought you had something for me to do!"

He smiled at Naruto. "Sorry, sorry," he apologized thinly. "I just needed to ensure that we would all be able to make it! It can get difficult to get you guys together these days, but I

figured this way everyone would come. You know," and he turned his conniving eyes to Sasuke, his words suddenly gaining the weight of an entire planet, "since it's an order."

Sasuke kept his jaw clenched tight, glaring now at a point on the wall down by Naruto's feet. An order, was it? How ridiculous. He couldn't believe that he rushed all the way from Kiri to be here tonight. Kakashi certainly wasn't unaware of the fact that he had no leverage to be handing Sasuke *orders*. As he thought this, a tug on his cloak had him turning back to Sakura. He made sure to school his expression as blank as possible so as to not spook her. "Sasuke-kun?" She greeted softly. He blinked at her. "How have you been?"

He hoped letting go of his breath would relieve the tension in his chest, but it didn't. "Fine," he muttered, only barely forcing himself to make it more than a grunt.

"That's good," she said, the words coming from somewhere deep within her.

Sasuke couldn't tell if Naruto was dense to the tone of the room or expertly good at diverting, but he was immensely grateful for it either way. "So where are we gunna eat?" he said in his most Naruto-like way. "Will there be ramen?"

While Kakashi had no leverage as Hokage to keep Sasuke under his thumb, it was apparent he wasn't using his government position for this. "Someplace quiet," Sasuke demanded toward his old teacher, frustrated to be manipulated in such a way.

Kakashi had begun to make his way toward the door, Sasuke pulling Sakura aside to let him pass. "Yes, don't worry about that. I made us reservations."

_o-O-o_

The restaurant wasn't far away, located just out of the center of town. It was upscale, which Sasuke was thankful for if it meant that there would be less patrons. Sakura plastered herself to his side as they walked down the street with Naruto strolling carelessly on his other, his earlier disappointment completely dissolving at the prospect of a free meal (Sasuke himself had his doubts about the 'free' part; Kakashi had never mentioned anything about paying for them). With Kakashi on Sakura's other side, the four of them were certainly a spectacle, each of them a noteworthy figure to the general public by themselves. Sasuke continually pulled down the front of his hood over his face.

Luckily their walk wasn't long enough for them to run into anyone, and the host of the restaurant seemed well aware of their arrival and did nothing out of ordinary upon seating them. Kakashi had pre-ordered their menu for the night, so the food came out almost immediately. Not wanting to chance it, Sasuke pulled on his hood again as their meal arrived. The other three noisily expressed their awe at the food; thankfully Sakura, seated across from him, seemed to be perking back up into her usual self in front of Sasuke. A blessing and a curse.

Observing the meal, Kakashi commented wistfully, "Oh, this food looks delicious! It's a bit hot, though. We should cool it off." Sasuke only had seconds to be perplexed as to why Kakashi was performing a quick series of hand signs before a large draft of wind gushed directly at his face. The wind caught the back of his hood, the momentum yanking the fabric

off of his head so that it fluttered down to his shoulders. “Ah, sorry, sorry,” Kakashi apologized in a wisp of a voice. “But you know, it *is* rude to have your hood up in an establishment like this.”

Exposed, Sasuke didn’t back down his even glare at Kakashi, who, damn him, did not seem fazed.

“So, Sasuke-kun, what have you been up to?” Sakura asked him innocently enough.

Before Sasuke could consider something appropriate to answer, Naruto added, “Yeah, how’d that mission in Kiri go?”

Sasuke had a new fire in him now, one cursing Naruto’s dumb face into eternal hell. Of course, Sakura noticed right away, tilting her head to ask the oblivious blond, “How do you know Sasuke had a mission at Kiri?” Naruto realized his mistake, freezing on the spot with his chopsticks still in his mouth. Sasuke wished there was a subtle way he could slam the idiot’s face into the table. It was hard to focus on ways he could flip the situation when his mind was buzzing with the violence it wanted to inflict.

“I told him!” Kakashi said cheerily.

Sasuke’s insides went cold. Naruto looked just as surprised as Sasuke felt, which could only mean…

“You told Naruto where Sasuke was?” Sakura asked dubiously.

“Well, Naruto asks me about Sasuke, you see,” Kakashi explained smoothly, and Sakura grew small in her seat at that.

Too loud, Naruto began to laugh, “Haha, yeah, it’s kinda hard to pinpoint where Sasuke is all the time, but I figure if anyone knows, it’d be the guy sending him on missions!” If anything cemented the fact that Naruto *didn’t* ask Kakashi about Sasuke’s whereabouts, it was this. Which meant that Kakashi was covering for them because he knew that Sasuke had been to see him at some point, but hadn’t made an effort to see Sakura. He wondered if he actually *was* followed on that night he ditched the first dinner invitation.

Bitterly, Sasuke lamented to himself. What did it even *matter* that he had been over Naruto’s? Who the hell cared where Sasuke went? There’s no rulebook making it mandatory that he needed to see both Naruto and Sakura an equal amount. Or for him to see anyone, for that matter. It was no one else’s business where he went. She had to know he was seeing Kakashi for missions, but it was clear from the way she shrunk in her seat that she hadn’t been asking for details about how often Sasuke came to the village; perhaps she deluded herself into thinking that he would come to see her every time he visited and didn’t think she had to ask. Peeved as he was, he knew that if Sakura found out that he was making specific visits to see Naruto but not her, it would devastate her. But that only added another reason for why he didn’t want to see her.

The dinner continued, the other three members at the table keeping up conversation with little effort added by Sasuke. The food was good, so he let himself enjoy it. His own reservations

aside, he couldn't help the bubbling nostalgia that was brewing within him from being with these three. He realized that this was the first time since the end of the war that they had all been in the same room together. And it wasn't like they were together during the war for leisure. Despite everything the past five years had brought them, they still had the same dynamic. Naruto just as energetic (*more* energetic, probably), Sakura just as passionate, Kakashi as astute, and Sasuke as coolly observant.

Nostalgia was a rarity Sasuke never had the grounds to enjoy. He found that the longer the group around him laughed, the harder it was for him to not succumb to it. He refused to let go of his bitterness at Kakashi, regardless. Sasuke was far from the kid he used to be, for better or worse; his eyes were quicker now. Kakashi's speed at eating was easier for him to catch, especially with his Rinnegan always activated. He only realized too late that finally revealing his old teacher's elusive profile did nothing to quell the nostalgia he was trying to fight.

Turned out he was too smugly satisfied to try to deny it, though. It felt good to be spiteful. Though seeing Kakashi's real face for the first time was admittedly a bit underwhelming for what he had chalked it up to be in his youth. It was the principal of the matter that he was finally able to. And who was to know? Having this knowledge might serve as useful tool to dangle over his old teacher in specific situations in the future.

With the meal almost finished, Naruto rubbed his expanded belly. "I gotta go find a bathroom," he noted.

"Naruto!" Sakura scolded the crudeness.

"I'll be right back!" Naruto exclaimed, getting up and disappearing into the back of the restaurant.

Sakura sighed, standing up. "Honestly. He'll never grow up. I'll be right back as well."

And then Sasuke was left alone with Kakashi, who rested his chin on top of his hands, elbows propped on the table. "So, Sasuke. How was your meal."

Scoffing, he raised up off of his seat. "I can't stay."

"You're still on your mission. Sit down." Kakashi ordered.

Sasuke scowled. It was a direct order which Sasuke had no grounds to obey. He stayed standing. "Stop treating me like a kid."

It felt as though Kakashi's voice was booming even though he kept it quiet enough to not disturb the atmosphere of the restaurant, which was near empty. "Start acting like an adult." Sasuke scoffed again, turning away to look at the ground. "I did hope you would grow out of this moody teenager phase."

"Why were you following me," he demanded.

"To see if you listened to me and went to Sakura's like I had asked you to," he responded simply. "You didn't, so now we're here," he gestured around to the restaurant. Figured.

At a loss for a decent response, Sasuke settled, “I didn’t tell him anything about the mission. I’m not an idiot.”

“I’m not worried about that.” Sasuke stayed silent. “I’m happy you are a decent enough person to check in on at least one of your friends.” He kept quiet, trying not to think about the fact that he only went there the first time out necessity, and the other times to take advantage of a good night’s sleep. Whatever. “I think I’m going to save you the lecture, mainly because it would be rude to forcefully tie you down in this nice restaurant, which I’m sure I would have to do to get you to sit still for it. But I am going to remind you that all of us do care about you, Sasuke. I’m sure you’re aware that this is the first time we’re all together since the end of the war.” Sasuke turned his head further away at this, his nose scrunching up on its own. “It’s concerning that you’ve been avoiding us. It’s not that we don’t trust you. We would all just like to see your face more than once every other month. Hear what’s going on.”

“I can go where I want,” Sasuke spat.

“No one’s saying you can’t,” Kakashi rebutted, his tone more even now. “Though, speaking as Hokage, it’s worth reminding that you are only allowed that freedom because of the trust I have in you to not be tempted to fall back into old habits. You should find it ironic that the other ninjas under my control are not afforded the same luxury of freedom as you.” This was rich; they both knew the real reason why Sasuke was afforded the freedom to go where he pleased. “But lately I’ve been concerned that maybe you didn’t feel the same way about your old team as we do to you. That you don’t *want* to see us again. Or care about us enough to want to know how we’re doing. You can see how that would put me in a dilemma,” Damn him. His jaw felt tired from how hard he was clenching it. He *hated* this emotion. It was all he felt recently. “Sakura’s coming,” Kakashi warned.

Sasuke sat down.

They only spent another ten minutes at the table before calling the night over. As predicted by everyone but Naruto, Kakashi did not pay for their meals. On the way out with Naruto chattering away in front of them about the dinner and Kakashi being misleading, Sasuke had no choice but to let Sakura hold onto his arm through his cloak. He hated the way it made him feel worse. When they made it outside, Kakashi smiled at all of them. “This was a great night, guys. Let’s do it again sometime. And Sasuke, do be certain Sakura gets home alright, will you?” And then he disappeared.

Damn him. His mouth tensed into a thin line, letting out a soft, “Yeah,” as he felt Sakura’s grip falter, then tighten. Then Naruto’s eyes flashed to his, and all Sasuke could do was receive the glance. It was a careful emotion, steady and so un-Naruto-like that it had Sasuke reeling in confusion. With another flash, the shared expression was gone. Naruto waved back at the pair of them, calling out a goodbye. He ran off in a blur. Sasuke longed for him to stay, to break the tension like he always did.

This was going to be painful. Sasuke fixed his hood before leading them down the road. No use delaying here and making the walk take longer. They were silent for only a moment before Sakura attempted conversation. “So you never really answered what you’ve been doing lately. Besides going on missions, that is.”

“I’ve been visiting the different villages. Hidden ones and not.”

She smiled at him. “That sounds nice!” *I guess*, Sasuke didn’t reply, because it sounded too flippant. But that meant he didn’t have an answer for her, so after a moment she was forced to continue, lest they fall into silence. “Have you been helping people?”

Helping people to atone for his so called ‘atrocities’. That was what he was doing, according to the village. Whatever. “’Been trying to.”

“How is it going for you?”

“Alright.” *If you exclude the fact that I’m still a wanted criminal in all other countries*, he did not add. It was quiet again, and Sasuke wanted to kick himself. Kakashi’s words echoed in his ear; *did* he care enough to want to know how Sakura was doing? He *wanted* to care that much. He did care, but he still hesitated. Forcing himself, he asked. “What have you been up to?”

He remembered immediately why he never asked Sakura such questions. It was so instantaneous. A moment before and she was cautious and awkward, but one little acknowledgment from Sasuke and she was clinging to him tighter, talking nonstop. She made every interaction between them so grandeur; all he asked her was what she was doing, and she had manipulated his intentions in her mind to make it seem like he was *fawning* over her. There was nothing Sasuke could do with this. Years of him squashing her advances have seemed to go to waste. He wished he could be as heartless as he used to be, that he could have just walked away with Naruto instead.

It was harder now that he actually cared for her.

So he listened to her talk about the hospital, how it’s been quiet from any real injury, but boisterous in silly training accidents of the academy and genin level. About last week when Lee hobbled in because he dropped his weights on his toe and shattered the bone, or how one of their old classmates burned off their eyebrows on a paper bomb. The old names just made Sasuke feel more awkward, especially since Sasuke did not remember who exactly they belonged to. Then she told a story about how a few months ago Naruto had come to her with two fishhooks in one thumb- he tried to get the first out with the second. Idiot. She explained that he had healed so quickly that by the time he got to her, the hooks were imbedded under his skin.

Eventually they came upon her house. As they approached it, she went quiet. He knew it was coming before she said it. “Are you going to be here tomorrow?”

“No,” he answered.

“Oh…” she trailed off, and he could see her brain working up her next question. “Do you have a place to sleep tonight?” He didn’t answer her. For some reason, he wanted to keep the fact that he had been sleeping at Naruto’s under lock and key, as if it was something to be protected. “You can… sleep here, if you want.”

The jolt of anxiety had him spit, “No,” before he had time to school his rudeness.

He cursed himself for it at her expression. The simple word had crushed her, and he felt a pang of her devastation, even despite her shaky smile. “Oh, right. I didn’t mean it like-”

“Sakura,” he interrupted, desperate for her to not continue on that rambling path. She looked up at him, her eyes wide and green and shining, and it wasn’t until then that he pictured the way she had taken to him saying her name. It was so frustrating. He felt like he was back at the academy, just learning chakra control. Unable to produce jutsu, but giving himself the slightest more gas and then overdoing it. She was so touchy, and Sasuke could not figure out the proper amount of *anything* to keep her head on straight. Clenching his teeth tight together, he floundered for what to add, but he couldn’t decipher what would be the best thing to say that would both not devastate her, nor be warped into feeding her delusions.

After another moment, Sakura asked him with her eyelids fluttering, “When will you be back?”

The question enraged him further. “I don’t know.”

“Oh… Okay. Good night then, Sasuke-kun.” She hugged him, because of course she did, arms around his neck and squeezing him too tightly. When she broke apart, she gave him a soft, hopeful smile before disappearing behind the door.

Five minutes later Sasuke was knocking on Naruto’s window. He had little memory of the journey over; his anger had muddled his thoughts. All he did was allow his body to move on instinct, and it brought him to the apartment. Naruto was in his ratted pajamas, jaw dropping at him from inside. Rolling his eyes, Sasuke opened the window himself and slid into the apartment. He was already rummaging in the dresser for the t-shirt and pants by the time Naruto was able to speak coherently, “What are you doing here?!”

Sasuke eyed him incredulously, “I’m going to take a bath.”

“Oi! I meant- I thought you were going to Sakura’s!”

He was going to be this kind of stupid tonight. “I already did.”

“I-I thought…” Sasuke turned to give him a look. *You thought what*. Naruto wasn’t able to make an actual response out of his sputtering. Rolling his eyes, Sasuke vanished to run his bath.

When he came out twenty minutes later, Naruto was sitting on his bed with his chin resting on his knees. Paying him no mind, Sasuke climbed into the other side of the bed and buried himself under the blankets, the stress of the day instantly melting away in its plushness. In here, he could forget about Sakura’s desperation, about Kakashi’s guilt trips, about being in a hometown that hated him and that he hated right back. He could let the warm softness drag him under into a peace he hadn’t known since childhood.

At least, so long as Naruto didn’t start talking to him. “Sasuke?” Maybe if he stayed still, Naruto wouldn’t be able to see him. “Do you want to talk about it?”

No such luck. Sighing his frustration, Sasuke balled his hand into a fist on the mattress. “Talk about what.”

“Sakura-chan.”

Normally, he wouldn’t deem that worthy of a response. But he was, frankly, curious as to what Naruto could possibly try to tell him about her. So he let out a scoff of indignation. “What *about* Sakura?”

“Well, she’s been really worried about you.” Naruto began smartly.

Sasuke waited for him to continue. He didn’t. “*Okay*?” he goaded.

“I mean, you haven’t been to see her at all, and I don’t think you would have gone to see her for another *year* if Kakashi-sensei didn’t force you. Do you…” he switched to a whisper here, the nerves radiating off of him, “not like her?”

As if it was that simple. Anger bubbled in him, but not at Naruto. “Don’t ask stupid questions,” he nagged as he pressed his face further into the soft pillow.

A contradictory thing to say to Naruto. “Well, you’re kind of mean to her and you’re always avoiding her. What would anyone think when they see the way you treat her? Unless…” his voice felt like it had leaned in closer behind him, whispering in a gossipy way, “say, Sasuke, is it because you’re secretly in *love* with her?”

The speed in which Sasuke clobbered Naruto in the face with his pillow came as a second nature. “*Didn’t I just say not to ask stupid questions*?!” In *love* with her? How could this moron have possibly come to that conclusion? Had Sakura’s delusions muddled everyone else, as well?

To Sasuke’s horror, he emerged from behind the pillow laughing, commandeering the pillow to his lap. “Is that it? You avoid her because you actually love her, but you’re too embarrassed to say anything!”

Were they ten years old again?! “Are you *moronic*?!”

“Ah, your face is getting red! Say, Sasuke, I’ve never seen you like this!”

It took Sasuke a moment to stare at Naruto, agape, before he had the sense to slam his face into his palm. “You’re- the *dumbest* person I know, Naruto.”

But the insult didn’t deter him the way Sasuke had hoped. Instead, he sobered, speaking then in a soft voice, “Hey, Sasuke, you know Sakura-chan doesn’t care about what you did in the past, right? Sakura, she-” Sasuke swallowed thickly at where Naruto was pulling the conversation. He was glad his face was still buried in his hand as he listened in horror, “You wouldn’t know it, but the way she talks about you… The difference in the way she acts around you is really something. When you were gone… she wanted you back more than anything. She really looks at you like you’re the world, you know? It still kind of makes me jealous, sometimes...”

"*Naruto*," Sasuke couldn't bare it anymore. He couldn't help the way his voice felt like gravel, or the way he felt like ripping his own hair out. His blue eyes did nothing but blink. Damn it all. His fist hit the bed between them, the action doing little to quell his emotion. To hear Naruto talk about the way Sakura acted around him, how helpless she always was with him, then how Naruto was jealous of it? It was like burning torture. "I *don't* like her like that. That's the whole problem."

"So then…" Naruto tried to make sense of it, and this time Sasuke couldn't blame him. "So then you *do* hate her?"

"*No*," Sasuke defended. The words jumbled up in the front of Sasuke's mind, mixing and warping and landing in a puddle on his tongue. He clenched his teeth tight, unable to formulate them. He didn't hate her. But he didn't love her. Why was that such a hard concept for her to grasp? Why couldn't Sasuke articulate that? Just come out and say it-

"So you just think of her as a friend?" His head snapped to where Naruto sat now cross legged next to him, taking him in. He had his head cocked slightly to one side as he mulled over this bit of information. "So she's just a friend to you, but she keeps being so helpless around you, always being clumsy and hanging onto you. It would be easier if you did love her like that, but you don't. Man, that's gotta be really awkward." Sasuke had never felt more naked. Naruto had been able to hit the nail on the head so accurately, with just the barest bit of words. Naruto was able to figure his intentions out so easily. Why couldn't Sakura?

Trying to pull himself back into his own body, he swallowed hard, "Y-… Yeah…"

Then Naruto turned his head to him and Sasuke flinched under the scrutiny. "You shouldn't keep letting her make a fool of herself. It's not fair to her to keep her strung up like that."

His anger pulled him back into control. Clicking his tongue, Sasuke insisted, "She already knows."

"Um," Naruto hummed doubtfully. "I don't think she does." Sasuke was surprised to hear such a soft chuckle come from him. Gentle grin on his face, Naruto continued, "It's been a long time. A lot has happened since you rejected her when we were kids."

A lot *has* happened, apparently. Sasuke found himself swallowing thickly again, for different reasons. Who was this Naruto? He had grown up. *Naruto*, of all people, had grown up while Sasuke was out in the world drowning in its pain. He closed his eyes, trying to block that thought from his mind before it caused him more harm.

But then a hand rested on his shoulder, sending sparks of electricity from the point of contact as Naruto leaned in. "Ugh, this is such a *you* problem. A pretty girl likes you but you don't like her back. You're so damn annoying."

Naruto was on the bedroom floor in the next moment. "*Dumbass*," Sasuke said through clenched teeth. "I'm going to sleep, now," he bid as he angrily found his position in bed, facing the wall.

“You hardly said anything at dinner! I wanted to talk more!” Naruto whined from behind him, completely undisturbed about having been thrown so rudely out of his own bed.

“Go to sleep,” Sasuke could hear fondness in the way Naruto sighed.

A lot *had* happened since he rejected Sakura as kids. For the life of him, Sasuke couldn’t understand how the events of the past five years somehow made her want to be around him more. The number of times he came at her with the unbridled intention to *kill* her… he stopped his train of thought. Don’t think about that. Don’t think…

As Naruto’s weight settled into the bed behind him, Sasuke found it easier to not think.

_o-O-o_

Chapter End Notes

if you couldn't tell, my favorite translation for "usuratonkachi" is "dumbass"

3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_o-O-o_

Sasuke's eyes fluttered half-open upon the white ceiling, illuminated by the morning sun. His whole body felt like a blissful puddle, his mind rejuvenated from the full night's rest. There was no rush. He was safe. He could allow himself to close his eyes again to take advantage of the comfort, soaking as much of it up as he could before he had to leave and was forced back into struggling for two hours of sleep in damp caves or on mattresses like wood. No, he should do what he could to memorize this exact moment, every inch of him in bliss. The softness against his toes, his knees, his hips, his shoulder. The warm weight over his waist, the breath against his ear-

Sasuke's eyes flew the rest of the way open taking in the sight of Naruto's sleeping form draped over him, face inches away from his neck. He was holding onto Sasuke's midriff with one careless arm, and Sasuke was horrified to realize that his own hand was currently holding it in its place. Acting on instinct, he removed it quickly before shoving the sleeping body off of him. In the same swift movement, Sasuke stood up.

There were a few indignant sleepy sounds coming from behind him, and then a confused, rough, "Sasuke?"

"Go back to sleep," Sasuke told him, doing his best to keep his back toward him as he retrieved his clothes from where he left them on top of the dresser.

But Naruto had rolled over to ask, blearily, "Are you leaving?"

He tried to calm down; it didn't seem like Naruto realized the position they had been in two seconds prior. "Yes."

Naruto sighed out a sleepy whine. "I wanted to show you my Fireball Jutsu. I've mastered it!"

He shouldn't have been surprised at all that Naruto managed to master Fireball, especially with that Fox inside him. It had been a month. Still, the old habit to be jealous of Naruto's progress stirred feebly in him as if it still had a right to be there. He pursed his lips. "Wait until we're in battle to show me that."

"Do you want to spar me today?!" Sasuke was taken aback by how loud the priorly sleeping boy had suddenly become, his energy already at maximum from the mere mention of battle.

He should have been more careful with his words. Sasuke's eye twitched at him. "I didn't mean today."

“Aw,” Naruto moaned dramatically, giving Sasuke whiplash from his quick emotions.

Seeing the way Naruto had slumped over had Sasuke sighing. “…Next time,” he promised despite himself. A pang hit his chest as he watched the way Naruto grinned at him from that. A promise of a next time. Sasuke swallowed thickly, because he knew the question was coming. The one Sakura had asked him last night, the one that had sparked blinding rage. When was ‘next time’? How long was Sasuke going to be away this time? Would it be another month of waiting? Two? How long was Naruto going to have to hold onto this feeble promise?

“Okay,” Naruto smiled at him. “Next time.”

The question never came.

_o-O-o_

Sasuke was back the next week. He had to wait this time, because there was someone else in Naruto’s apartment; they seemed to be having a pretty important discussion. It took him a moment to recognize the third Hokage’s grandson. He waited on an opposing rooftop for about half an hour before he left, glad that all they were doing was talking and not showing off those dumb jutsus. When he watched the younger genin turn the corner down the road, he set off to knock against the glass of Naruto’s bedroom window.

There was a sudden change in Naruto’s contemplative expression; it was the same shocked look, gaping and pointing at Sasuke instead of doing the polite thing and opening the window. Sasuke had to open it himself, but he didn’t come inside. “Come on,” he egged, nodding his head.

“C-Come where?!” Naruto asked as Sasuke rolled his eyes. “Oh! Are we fighting? *Now*?” He couldn’t help the small smirk forming on his lips as he huffed an amused laugh in response. “Hold on!” Naruto exclaimed, running over to grab his shoes.

They ended up in the farthest training ground from the center of the city. “We should probably lay down some rules for this,” Sasuke mused, rifling through his weapons pouch to double check his inventory. Naruto blinked at him, so he expanded. “No other ninjutsu. Only taijutsu and fire style. Don’t go pulling out your Bijuu Mode here and waking up the entire village. And no Shadow Clones. They’re too noisy.”

Laughing nervously, Naruto rubbed the back of his head. “Yeah, that’s probably for the best.” Then he pointed accusingly back at Sasuke, “Then no Sharingan for you!” Naruto had gotten more perceptive, realizing Sharingan wasn’t technically ninjutsu. “And cover up your Rinnegan! That’s not fair either!”

But still, Sasuke knew how to handle him. “Sharingan is part of my natural ability.”

“It’s not fair if I can’t use Kurama but you can use your Sharingan. Kurama is part of my natural ability, too.”

Smirking, Sasuke goaded, knowing he had him with, “You don’t think you can beat me with my Sharingan?”

“You don’t think you can beat me *without* your Sharingan?”

Damn.

Scoffing, Sasuke glared at him. Whatever. He didn’t need a leg up for this. “I’m not covering the Rinnegan,” he demanded. “I’m already handicapped a limb.” And the only thing he had to cover it was the headband he had stowed away in his cloak, and he was not unearthing that can of worms tonight. Disgruntled, Naruto reluctantly caved with that, his arms crossed defiantly across his chest. Sasuke pursed his lips, choosing to use the distraction of Naruto’s childish behavior to send the kunai he was pretending to take count of soaring toward him. Naruto had only just managed to deflect it with one of his own. The pair of them had jumped back from each other, instantly taking their stances.

“You were aiming for the face!” Naruto yelled heatedly, though he was grinning widely.

“You countered it, didn’t you?” Sasuke replied as a handful of shuriken left his fingertips.

And then they were fighting. Fist into flesh, blade into kunai. They stuck to taijutsu for a while, feeling each other out for a bit. He knew how much better Naruto had gotten at this from the last time they fought- Sasuke cut that thought off in its tracks. He didn’t need to be letting himself get distracted with that last battle of theirs. The point was that Naruto had done a lot of work with his taijutsu over the years they were apart; they were well matched, though without the Sharingan, Sasuke had to be extra careful to read his movements by other means. Sasuke broke the rule about no ninjutsu by using an automatic substitution jutsu by accident, and Naruto didn’t say anything about it being against the rules, so they continued to use them when needed. After a few minutes of countering each other’s blows, Naruto managed to catch Sasuke in the stomach, which he used to parry back with a kick to Naruto’s head.

There was something in the way Naruto smiled at him after, wiping his bottom lip with his forearm. Challenging. It was a short pause between blows, but it felt like a year. Quick to get back, Sasuke lunged forward, feigning a punch to get Naruto’s guard up. Instead, Sasuke used the arms as leverage to flip over his head, pushing up off of him and making him lose balance.

This was where Sasuke chose to do his first Fireball Jutsu. Naruto vanished into a puff, a discarded log burning in the fire in place of him. Of course it was a substitution, but Sasuke hadn’t realized until too late. Scoffing to himself, he thought bitterly that if he had his Sharingan activated, there would have been no way he could have missed that. The active Rinnegan wasn’t as helpful as he was used to when it wasn’t combined with the Mangekyou, especially since Naruto knew to weave the signs in his blind spot. He turned just in time to block Naruto’s incoming punch.

There were a few impressive moments. Naruto interrupted his Lion’s Barrage; he must have had plenty of practice with Lee over the years to figure out how to do that. Sasuke caught Naruto up in twine with a cunning hidden shuriken trick. And then, while wrapped up,

Naruto displayed his Fireball Jutsu up the string, making Sasuke have to drop the end. It was an impressive size, though he still wasted too much chakra for it. But when did Naruto ever have to actually depend on chakra control? Well- Sasuke knew of one time when it had finally been exhausted, but once again he didn't let himself focus on that topic of thought. Too distracting.

He was unsure how long they had been fighting. There was a pleasant burning in his chest from exertion, but he was still plenty amped up. The moments he longed to be able to use his *real* power became fewer and farther between; this wasn't about that. This was-

Fun.

Realizing this, Sasuke was forced to recognize the nostalgia of fighting like this with Naruto. Back before either of them had learned anything more substantial than how to throw a knife. Well, Naruto knowing Fire Style certainly broke that illusion, but it was a nice even playing ground. Likewise was that Naruto's taijutsu was lightyears ahead of where he had been back then, and comparatively was now an equal match to Sasuke's. And, of course, the biggest difference was just how little Sasuke underestimated him now. Sasuke understood Naruto's limits, in which he knew that the knucklehead *had* no limits. He was forced to think ten steps in advance, because he knew to be prepared for Naruto to slip out of any one attack no matter how inescapable it might seem to him.

With this, he was forced to think about all of the times he had attempted to take Naruto's life. He couldn't help it as he threw a kunai and it lodged safely into Naruto's bicep, a mile away from any vital areas he would have been aiming for a year ago. The thought made him sick, like he should never wield the Chidori again.

It also almost made him miss catching Naruto's fist before it made contact with his jaw. Dumb. Stop thinking about all that shit and pay attention to the fight; hadn't he just been telling himself how detrimental it was to underestimate this ninja? Especially without his Sharingan activated. Sasuke couldn't afford to not have all of his focus on the fight, so he attempted to bring his right mind back by assessing the scene. Surveying the situation had backfired on him when he noticed how light Naruto's punch felt in his hand. He knew what Naruto's punch was *supposed* to feel like. He cursed himself; that had not been what he intended to do by assessing the scene. It was a stupid thing to think about, because Naruto's other fist was coming, and Sasuke panicked for a moment when he automatically tried to catch that one too, only to remember he didn't *have* another hand to do that with. So all he could do was tilt his head to the side, the fist just grazing his ear as it continued to whizz by, bringing Naruto's face in close. Too close.

Their lips smashed together. Of course they did. Just when Sasuke was trying to squash the nostalgia.

Naruto's eyes were wide- he supposed so were his own. His lips felt the same as he remembered, which was not something he had let himself think about in years. The impact hurt from the force of it, but somehow the pain was too far back in his mind to register.

They stayed together for a moment, both of them freezing from the absurdity. There was nothing else to do but pull apart, which they did with an embarrassing wet noise. Naruto's

hands immediately came up to cover his victimized lips, pulling the one that had been in Sasuke's clutch away. Feeling the heat on his cheeks, Sasuke stood straight up and began to wipe at his own with what he hoped was dignity. His one finger lingered against the skin there, staring pointedly away from Naruto's face.

"*Why does this keep happening to us*?!" Naruto lamented dramatically. "I've kissed you more times than I've kissed anyone else!"

"Sh-Shut up, dumbass," Sasuke scorned. He didn't bring up the fact that Naruto was the *only* person he had ever kissed, three times now.

He could feel his own heart beating too loudly in his chest for the amount of exercise he had gotten. Swallowing thickly, Sasuke forced himself to walk over to collect the shuriken that were lodged in the ground a few feet away from them. "I guess we're all done," Naruto said uneasily behind him.

Trying to hide his own embarrassment, Sasuke mumbled, "There's no sense fighting until there's a winner between us with only Fire Style and taijutsu. We'd be here until sunrise. Next week."

Laughing nervously, Naruto nodded. "Yeah. But next time I'll beat you senseless, Sasuke, just you wait!"

The uncomfortable knot in Sasuke's stomach unclenched slightly at this, and he found himself able to smirk back, "Like you could."

A few hours later, minutes from sleep in Naruto's sinfully soft bed, Sasuke's finger brushed against his lips again.

_o-O-o_

This time when he woke up to Naruto's arm haphazardly hung over him, he was able to calmly assess himself. Once again, he marveled at how comfortable sleeping in this bed was, about how even the awkwardness of being so close to someone else ebbed away when encased in its plushness. He could feel the length of Naruto's leg against the backs his own. Sasuke's back was against the mattress while his bottom half was on its side, his spine twisted, though comfortable. Naruto was flat on his stomach, aforementioned arm over Sasuke's stomach as aforementioned leg bent in along the curve of Sasuke's. It was clingy, but with the way Naruto was sprawled like the dead, he wouldn't really call it 'intimate'.

It was a bit of a stretch to turn his head; Sasuke repositioned his legs upward so that he could turn to let himself take in Naruto's sleeping face. He was snoring, but it wasn't overtly obnoxious. His eyes were shut delicately and his lips slightly open, barely moving in time with each small snuffling snore. Sasuke swallowed something in his throat, remembering how those lips had connected with his own last night.

He had never put any thought into kissing. The entire idea was such a foreign concept to him, even now. He didn't understand how everyone else around him was so obsessed with stuff like that. It always seemed like such an unappealing thing to do. All of that love shit was

forced upon him as a kid with every new girl that he met. Even now, one of the reasons Sasuke couldn't remove his hood in other towns was in fear of attracting the attention of all of the women in the tavern, who insisted on bothering him regardless of how coldly he treated them. It had always disgusted him how these girls made themselves so willingly vulnerable. Even in the midst of battle sometimes. It was senseless.

Naruto was the only person he had ever kissed. Three times, now. Each of those times had been a complete accident. The first two were hazy to him; it had been so long ago. He had been convinced that he hated Naruto back then, so of course he convinced himself he had hated the kisses. They were certainly awkward at the time. But after last night he was forced to realize that kissing… didn't feel bad.

Which was strange to say, because the force of it was definitely painful. He had a bruise on the inside of his lips from where his teeth hit. But there had also been a weird, electric jolt that he couldn't deny. It was stupid of him to think about, but that had to be why everyone else seemed so concerned with kissing. It *did* feel good. And he supposed it would feel better if they hadn't smacked into each other hard enough to bruise.

And the arm on his waist didn't feel too bad, either. It was such a pointless thing, he thought, to be so physically close to another person. He thought back to the way Sakura would always hug him, when Karin would drape herself over him, when other strange women would try to caress his arm. It never felt good. Just awkward and stifling.

Naruto, for some reason, didn't bother him.

Curiously, Sasuke rested his arm over Naruto's in the same way he had done in his sleep last week. They allotted perfectly. He could feel the way his hand splayed over Naruto's in the pit of his stomach, which made absolutely no sense. Thankfully the contact wasn't skin-to-skin, as it was Naruto's right bandaged hand, the one reconstructed for him out of Hasirama's cells. He contemplated for a minute, wondering if there would be a difference if the contact was skin-to-skin. It was a dumb thing to think about, so he turned his attention back to Naruto's lips.

That was even more stupid. Why would he care to look at Naruto's lips? What purpose did kissing someone even serve? What was there to truly *gain* from kissing someone? He supposed he had to concede that there must be pleasure attached to it because he had felt it last night, but honestly, what good did giving into such mundane pleasure do-

Well, some pleasures were worth it. Hadn't he been making excuses to come back to Konoha *just* to sleep in this bed?

But this pleasure was different. Rest was an important part of life. It helps with healing after battle and replenishing chakra. He always felt so much better after his nights in Naruto's bed; he felt stronger and more alert. This kind of pleasure had real world benefits. But kissing? How could kissing do something substantial like heal a wound? It was pointless pleasure.

Still, people did it. They gave into pleasure with no physical gains to atone for it. It even made them weak, didn't it? How easy it would be to distract someone by kissing them so

they didn't see the blade of the knife you were thrusting into their stomach? It was really, honestly, truly such a stupid thing for people to do.

He leaned forward and pressed his lips curtly onto Naruto's.

Electric again. His chest filled with air without his conscious decision. Naruto's mouth was soft, incredibly soft, and he didn't know what to do about that information. It certainly did feel good to press their lips together with purpose instead of accidentally smashing into each other. He pulled back slowly, but he could still feel burning even after they separated. What was it? Was it some kind of chakra exchange? How could the simple press of flesh like this give such a visceral reaction?

Then Naruto made a sound, a low hum. A groan. Sasuke hastily pulled back further. Did he wake up? He froze, waiting for the blue eyes to open. They never did. Instead Naruto sighed, nuzzling deeper into his pillow.

Sasuke found that he couldn't relax. What was he thinking, kissing Naruto like that? What had he *gained* from that? A second of- pleasure? And then nothing but confusion. He had answered none of his questions. Instead, he had about a million more. Why had he *done* that?

Stupid.

He removed Naruto's arm from around him, placing it gently on the bed so as to not wake him. He was able to lift himself up until he was standing, though he felt almost lightheaded from doing so. Kissing *did* make you weak.

He had changed into his day clothes and was two seconds from opening the window to leave when he made the mistake of turning back to see Naruto still sprawled out on the bed. That one arm had found its position again over the ghost of where Sasuke's body had been. He was snoring louder now, his lips opening and closing in an even motion. Damn it all. He had to force himself to turn away before jumping out of the window.

Twenty minutes later he returned with a small bag of groceries.

That hadn't been his intention at all; he had told himself to leave. But then he found himself outside of a market in town, the image of Naruto passed out in his bed with his arm reaching out over that empty spot haunting him. He remembered last night, coming back to Naruto's apartment with nothing to eat but those damn cups of ramen. Upon entering the shop he had told himself it was to stock up for his trip, but it wasn't like eggs were a practical thing to travel with.

So he set himself to work preparing an actual breakfast: cooking the rice, broiling the fish, scrambling the eggs. Spinach and green onions in the eggs- give that idiot something *actually* good for his body. Sighing to himself, he wondered when the last time Naruto had an actual breakfast cooked in his apartment was.

"S-Sasuke?"

Turning around to see Naruto standing bleary-eyed in the doorway, Sasuke instructed briskly, “Get us something to eat this on.”

Naruto rushed for chopsticks and bowls; honestly, the fact that he didn’t even have an actual plate in this apartment was concerning, and that he was using disposable wooden sticks instead of buying a few pairs of reusable ones was just confusing. “No way!” he was saying excitably as he hurried to the table. “You should sleep over more often if you’re gunna cook breakfast!” Sasuke rolled his eyes, scooping rice into one of the bowls. “You know, it’s kinda weird to me that you can cook.”

Clicking his tongue, Sasuke furrowed his brows. “Why is that weird?”

He rubbed the back of his head, “Well, I mean, when did you learn it?”

Sasuke didn’t let himself freeze up at the question, instead moving forward to place a bowl on the table in front of Naruto. “I taught myself. It’s part of learning to be self-sufficient.” He knocked the back of his knuckles on Naruto’s skull. “Something *you* desperately need to learn, dumbass.”

“Oi!” he whined in response, now rubbing at the spot Sasuke had hit. “I’m self-sufficient!” Scoffing, Sasuke made a point to open Naruto’s fridge. It was barren, save for another bottle of milk and the same three condiments from two months ago. Naruto simply looked on in confusion, so then he opened Naruto’s pantry cupboard, where a plethora of cup ramen rest. Pursing his lips, Naruto tilted his head. “Are you looking for something?” Shoulders slumping, Sasuke let it drop before he became too emotionally invested. If anything, the old man at Ichiraku’s was probably ensuring that Naruto was eating properly, whether the idiot was aware of it or not.

As he sat to eat his bowl, Naruto had already wolfed half of his own down. “Man, I should make you cook me breakfast every time you sleep over. You owe me, right? I mean, you’re sleeping in *my* bed. It’s only fair.”

Well, shit. Sasuke glared at him evenly for a moment, sizing him up. He had been joking, of course, but the fact still remained. Sasuke knew to play it carefully. “Start washing your sheets once a week, and maybe I will.”

Blinking in surprise for only a moment, Naruto was quick to complain, “But you don’t even show up once a week!”

“You should be washing them once a week anyway,” Sasuke rebutted.

Pensive, Naruto offered, “How about you send me a message when you’re going to be in town, and I’ll wash them before you come?”

Like Sasuke knew or planned when he was going to come back to the village. “No.”

“Sasuke!”

“You should be washing your sheets once a week anyway!” He repeated, because it was true and Naruto should have responded properly to it. “It shouldn’t matter if someone else is sleeping in them.”

Indignant, Naruto sat back in his chair, poking at his breakfast, “I always take a bath before bed. They can’t get *that* dirty if I’m clean when I sleep in them.”

Thinking back to the color of the pillows, Sasuke shook his head. “They can. Wash them.”

“If I do, will you come by more often?” Sasuke’s eyes flashed to him. His chest felt heavy as he took in Naruto’s expression. His blue eyes were wide with hopefulness, but still cautionary, like he knew he was asking something risky. Dropping his gaze, Sasuke took in the fullness of Naruto’s bottom lip, jutting out in a pout. His throat worked itself over harshly at the sight- they even *looked* soft. Staring at them, the ghost of that electric surge tingled his own lips. He forced himself to look anywhere *but* there.

The damage was already done, though. Resigned, Sasuke did his best to fight whatever blood was trying to come up to his face. “I’ll think about it.”

Naruto’s smile felt so much more personal when it was closed. He would find any small excuse to grin at everyone around him, teeth wide and baring, exuberating that warmth and fiery energy. While those grins were Naruto’s signature, it was the moments when he would smile soft and genuine that were hard for Sasuke to deal with. He took another bite of his meal.

“And then you’ll cook me breakfast again!”

Choking on his food, Sasuke forgot himself and spat back, “I said ‘*maybe*’!”

_o-O-o_

But Sasuke did end up cooking for Naruto again on his next visit the following week. And the week after that. And the week after that, too.

Without realizing it, it had become a ritual that he could not escape. Once a week he showed up at Naruto’s window, they would go out for a late-night spar, come back where Sasuke would get the only full-night’s sleep since the week prior. Then he would wake up, go to the market, and cook them breakfast.

Eventually a month had passed; Sasuke had begun to force Naruto to participate in the cooking. This led to Sasuke tailoring their meals to determine which skill he wanted to instill in the hopeless blond this week. Naruto, it turned out, was not great at cooking. Not that Sasuke was surprised, but he had been hoping that he loved food enough to know that eggs were not *supposed* to catch on fire. Sasuke hadn’t even known that was possible. Turns out, Naruto really *did* grow up eating solely cup ramen and red bean soup.

They were eating in silence one morning when Naruto asked aimlessly, “Do you remember when we tried to see what Kakashi Sensei looked like without his mask?”

Sasuke almost choked on his miso soup. He remembered back to the dinner last month and felt immensely uncomfortable. “What made you think of that?”

Sighing, Naruto explained, “We took him to Ichiraku’s to see if he took it off while he ate. Sometimes I think about that while I’m eating.”

He waited for Naruto to continue, but he didn’t. “Is there a reason you’re bringing this up?”

“Well, I’ve eaten with him loads of times and I still haven’t seen him without his mask on, even though I always try to sneak a peek,” Naruto explained with a whine in his voice, which is a little surprising to Sasuke. Did Kakashi really *never* take off that mask? “But I think I know how he does it! He-”

“He just removes the mask for a moment too quick for the normal eye to see,” Sasuke interrupted. “He doesn’t do anything special.”

Suddenly, Naruto’s hand smacks to the table, startling him. “So you *have* seen Kakashi Sensei’s face! You’ve used your Sharingan?!”

Sighing, Sasuke shook his head, trying to fight off the slight heat coming to his face. “I’ve never felt compelled to. I’ve just seen his hand flinch and food disappear.”

“Don’t lie, Sasuke, I know you’re curious. I know you’ve peeked! You have your Sharingan- it’s probably so easy for you!” Sasuke felt himself growing smaller in his seat. Naruto stood up, pointing animatedly at him, “Aha! You have! Tell me what his actual face looks like!”

Shit. Clenching his jaw, Sasuke refused to meet Naruto’s eye. He thought back again to dinner the previous month, when he had already been angry with his old teacher and just wanted to be spiteful. And yeah, okay, he’d be lying to himself if he had said he wasn’t curious after all these years. He’d also be lying if he said he had never tried to use his Sharingan in the past for that explicit purpose. The difference now was that with the Rinnegan always activated, he could see it whether he wanted to or not, and it wasn’t like Kakashi could notice a difference in Sasuke when he was utilizing the Rinnegan. If it was any consolation, he had more questions *after* having seen his old teacher’s face than before. Why in the hell was Kakashi covering up his face if he didn’t have any kind of disfigurement? He could feel himself fully blushing as he revealed, “He has a mole.”

Making a noise of intense amazement, Naruto urged him on, “A *mole*!? Is it huge? Does it have a whole bunch of hairs on it?! Does he wear the mask to cover it up because it’s so gross?!”

“Wh- No, it’s just a normal mole,” Sasuke described before realizing that he shouldn’t do that. Changing his tactics, he goaded, “Can’t you just go into Sage Mode or something and see for yourself?”

It was like the simple thought had never donned on him. “…Sage …Mode?” Raising an eyebrow at him, Sasuke watched the puzzle pieces fit together in Naruto’s mind. He knew that Naruto’s Sage Mode gave him a speed boost, so it would only make sense he’d be able to utilize that to help him see Kakashi’s movements easily. “OH!” Naruto screamed. “I can’t

believe I've never thought of that! I should invite him to lunch today! It'd be worth buying him a bowl of ramen."

The obvious flaws in Naruto's plan were too blatant. If he really thought it would be as easy as simply going into Sage Mode at the right moment, Sasuke had a duty to squander his hope before he did something foolish like try to act on it. "That theory won't work in practice. Kakashi would be able to see your eyes and know what you're up to. He'd find a way around it. It never worked for me before because he always knew when I was attempting to catch him."

"How did you get him with the Sharingan, then?"

"My Rinnegan is always active. It's not as good as the Sharingan at catching movement, but it's enough, and nothing changes when I use it that would have alerted him," he explained, inwardly thinking that it was common sense. "Sage Mode takes you too long to stimulate. You won't be able to do it."

"I can do it really quickly with my Shadow Clones!" Naruto assured, then turned to look pensive, "I would just need someone to distract him for a bit so he doesn't see my eyes…" Sasuke's heart started to thump in his chest. Surely, this would be the moment. "Maybe I can get Sakura."

His chest fell in relief. He had been waiting all month for Naruto to ask him why he hadn't visited anyone else in the village, especially after that dinner. Why he had been to Konoha once a week for over a month but hadn't seen Sakura or Kakashi. Frankly, he had been waiting for Naruto to say something about how often he was coming, but he hadn't even mentioned that. Sasuke had been nervous, but for some reason he hadn't yet come close to initiating another Team 7 outing like he had feared, nor pressuring him to have that conversation with Sakura.

Regardless of the relief he felt, he couldn't stop the way he squinted at Naruto. It didn't make sense why he had avoided bringing such things up. Perhaps he had caught on to the fact that Sasuke didn't want to be pestered with it. If that was the case, then good.

Pushing the thought aside, Sasuke continued, "I don't think it's possible to get Kakashi *that* level of distracted."

Humming, Naruto pondered, "I'll just need more people for a bigger distraction. Maybe Gai and Lee; they're always so loud."

Pot, meet kettle. "He'll be ignoring them, anyway."

"You're right," he said, dejected, before another idea came to him. "Or maybe I can get both Sakura and Ino to have an argument over something!"

"If you want to get caught in the blood battle," Sasuke sighed.

"Well then, you come up with something!" Naruto challenged.

Rolling his eyes, Sasuke set his spoon down in his almost empty bowl. “It wouldn’t matter who was speaking; Kakashi would immediately find it suspicious if *you* weren’t the central part of the conversation, like you always are. Any moment when you’re being quiet is one to be suspicious of.”

“Oi!” Naruto yelled. Sasuke gave him a look; certainly Naruto wasn’t so self-unaware as to not know that.

Despite himself, the cogs in Sasuke’s brain started revving at the challenge. How to get Kakashi’s guard down enough that he wouldn’t notice Naruto going into Sage Mode mid-meal. The obvious answers would work on most chunin or lower ninja; to transform into a different patron and observe from afar. But the idea that Kakashi wouldn’t be clocking everyone in the room at all times was laughable even long before he became Hokage. Naruto’s chakra signature was so distinct that there was no way Kakashi’s keen nose wouldn’t immediately know it was him. Genjutsu was also out of the question with how adept Kakashi was at recognizing when he was in one. So he started weighing the strengths and weaknesses for such a mission; on one hand, the concept of Naruto choosing a mealtime to do something sneaky is pretty slim, as he was usually one-track-minded about food. On the other side of that same coin is that it would be out of character for him to stop eating for too long if he wasn’t using that time to talk. The biggest distraction didn’t need to be for Kakashi to not notice his eyes, but rather the rush of chakra that would come with Naruto activating his Sage mode.

Naruto would only have a moment. He couldn’t stay activated for anything longer; something quick enough where Kakashi would only be confused, not suspicious. Sasuke didn’t think there would be a way to keep him from being suspicious, but if they could keep him distracted enough and have the chakra surge short enough, they might be able to pull it off. There would need to be a serious conversation happening that would get everyone’s attention solely on the speaker, and deny any moment where Naruto speaking up would be normal. This way Naruto could pretend to be listening with no intention of interrupting, and Kakashi would be engaged enough to be analyzing solely on the speaker, but also not be such a participant in the conversation that he didn’t eat. It was a contradiction within itself, but that would have to be the only way. Now to think of who would be able to have that kind of captivating conversation-

Fuck. No, there had to be someone else. Someone had to have something going on in their life, someone close enough to both Naruto and Kakashi to open up about something… the more he thought about it, the more his palms sweat. But- no.

Sakura. Yes, Sakura would have to be the next best option. She could talk about… he let his eyes shut tight. He didn’t like that idea either, even if he wasn’t hypothetically present for it. And Naruto would have to talk to her beforehand; she would have to know what Naruto’s true goal was or she could accidentally compromise the mission. She would definitely punch him for wanting her opening up her feelings to them to be a distraction for such a stupid reason. And Sakura would get nothing out of it, either, because there would be no way Sakura’s eyes would be quick enough to catch Kakashi’s reveal in *any* situation.

He conceded. There was really only one person who would be able to hold such a conversation. Frustrated with himself, Sasuke averted his gaze. “It’s not possible,” he concluded.

“There has to be someone who can distract him!” Naruto persisted.

He could feel his own eyebrow twitch in annoyance. “There is. But it’s not going to happen.”

“What do you mean?”

Frustrated, Sasuke let his bowl hit the table loudly. “Someone has to have a conversation with the two of you that’s sobering enough to make it seem like you not eating or interrupting wouldn’t be suspicious. The conversation would have to be deep enough to keep him invested, but not overly so that he stops eating. The person would have to be close enough to the both of you to open up in such a way, and someone Kakashi would actually pay attention to enough to focus only on the speaker.”

Blinking twice, Naruto slowly came to the conclusion. “Close enough…” he trailed off, but then he pointed his finger directly at Sasuke. “You mean-!”

“It’s not gunna happen,” Sasuke shut down immediately.

He was whining again. “Come on, Sasuke! This is a once in a lifetime opportunity! He’s never going to let his guard down enough without you! It makes sense; he always watches you so closely!”

How he wished Naruto wouldn’t remind him of that. “I’m not doing it.”

Childishly, Naruto crossed his arms firmly over his chest, bottom lip jutting out. Not for the first time, Sasuke found he had a hard time looking away from him when he did that. He could see the conclusion Naruto was coming to moments before he landed there; he watched the gears in that blond head rotate and grind their way to their destination. Sasuke swallowed thickly as Naruto leaned forward in his seat. “You owe me!” he asserted boisterously.

He could feel his face getting hot again, which he would not allow to happen. He turned his head toward the wall. He considered denying that fact and responding angrily, as he so wanted to, that he did not owe Naruto *anything*. He was free to do whatever he so pleased. But the words couldn’t come out, because they weren’t true at all. He *did* owe Naruto. He owed Naruto too much. That sickly burning feeling settled back in his chest, that feeling he hated most in life. If it weren’t for Naruto, Sasuke would-

“I’ve been letting you sleep in my bed for weeks!” Sasuke was too stricken to move at first. Did Naruto really- “I don’t have to. I could just make you get a room at the inn, you know.” He did really.

Sasuke’s eyes fell shut again, calming the thumping up near his throat. He owed Naruto for being a hindrance of a guest, is all. Logically, Sasuke could argue that he was already cooking breakfast every visit now for that. But in reality, Sasuke knew he should take the

excuse. Releasing the tension inside him with one quick breath, Sasuke dropped his shoulders. “Fine.”

Naruto blinked, letting out a quiet, “Really?”

He hadn’t expected it to work. It was all Sasuke could do to not slam his face into his palm. Naruto being oblivious about what Sasuke owed him for was worse than if he was doing it on purpose. “Whatever,” Sasuke responded.

“Yes!” Naruto exclaimed, standing up and punching the air. “I should go tell Kakashi-sensei that he’s taking us out for lunch!”

He was so quick to leave that Sasuke had to use his shinobi reflexes to catch his wrist before he left the apartment. “Oi! We need more of a plan than that!”

“What do you mean?” Naruto stumbled as he was forced to turn back toward Sasuke.

Naruto was always exhausting. “As it stands right now, it’s out of character for me to be willing to go to lunch with you guys in broad daylight. And it would make no sense if I’m not going to also invite Sakura. We have to think about it from the perspective of me wanting to have a conversation with you guys, otherwise he’ll get suspicious.”

Tilting his head, Naruto was as unaware as ever. “I don’t think so. I think he’d just be happy you’re back in town.”

Shaking his head, Sasuke disagreed, “That’s how *you* would respond. Kakashi is more apprehensive of me.”

“Apprehensive-?”

Ignoring it before he had to explain that, too, Sasuke persisted, “Do you have something I can write on?” Naruto fetched him a small scroll of blank paper and a pencil. He closed his eyes, thinking. There was no way he’d be able to get around having to wait all day until nightfall. It would seem too desperate if he came during the day. Kakashi would be *too* focused on him to actually be eating while talking.

After he finished writing, he ripped off the bit of scroll and handed Naruto the note, which Naruto promptly read. He let out a small yelp as he bellowed, “You took that long to write two sentences?!”

“I was thinking,” Sasuke defended.

“‘I have something to discuss with Team 7. Meet me someplace quiet tonight.’ This doesn’t even mention anything about eating!” Naruto protested, waving the little note around in emphasis.

He clicked his tongue in annoyance before explaining, “It would be out-of-character for me to suggest going to eat together. You’re going to have to pretend to trick me into eating with the three of you. This will be a red herring to throw off any suspicion about what you’re actually planning. Sakura will chastise you for it, but Kakashi will play along.” Kakashi

would use the excuse to try to pin him down in one place for as long as he could. “We’ll wait until the actual meal before I start talking, but once I do, you’ll have to be quick. If I talk for too long, it’ll be suspicious. You’ll also need to make sure to shut down Sakura when she inevitably asks for me to explain what I needed to talk to you about before the meal starts. Just act like you normally would and insist on waiting for the food; your motivation would be that you don’t want me to dip on staying for the meal after I’ve said what I needed to. I don’t think we should tell Sakura what you’re up to. That’s just another person I’d have to worry about messing things up.” He would also have to find an excuse for her as to *why* he was humoring Naruto like this. This was more of a pain than it was worth. “And I can’t emphasize enough how important it is that you are quick getting in and out of Sage Mode. I don’t think anything longer than half a second will work with how great of a sensor he is.”

Sasuke turned his gaze back to Naruto to see him sweating. “D-Does it have to be so complicated? Can’t we just say I invited you all out to eat?”

“I would decline that. No one else knows I’m even in the country.” Blue eyes glared at him. “What?” he spat back at them.

Mumbling, Naruto kept squinting at him. “This would be so much easier if you weren’t so pissy and elusive.”

Blood beginning to boil, Sasuke confronted, “Do you want me to help you or not?”

Letting out a big sigh, Naruto admitted feebly, “Yes.”

“Then follow the plan,” he demanded.

“Okay, okay,” Naruto conceded before grinning sheepishly. “Can you go over it again just one more time?”

This was going to be insufferable.

_o-O-o_

Chapter End Notes

this is MY fic so I get to determine that the second kiss filler episode is canon

also don't kiss people in their sleep in real life okay this is just a fic

4

_o-O-o_

Despite Naruto's protests for him to stay, Sasuke spent the day in the neighboring pleasure district. It was a noisy place, just as he remembered it from the day he first saw Itachi since his clan's downfall. There didn't seem to be much in need of assistance, but he did manage to break up a drunken bar fight, wondering the entire time who the hell gets drunk enough to get into a bar fight in the middle of the afternoon. The bartender was kind to him for it, which was a useful ally for Sasuke to have in his type of work, so he didn't consider the day a total waste.

The sun was setting as he arrived back in Konoha, making the bright orange of Naruto's jacket more obnoxious and easier to track than usual. He and the other members of Team Seven were hanging around on the top of a building. Kakashi was quick to sense him, which was unfortunate because he felt like he could have used more time to calm the snake squirming around in his stomach.

He landed on the rooftop to Naruto beaming at him, laughing way too obviously for Sasuke's liking, "Oi, Sasuke!"

Looking around suspiciously, Sasuke frowned. Why were they on the roof of a building? Had Naruto failed his end of the mission and somehow wasn't able to lure Kakashi into a restaurant? "I'd rather not do this outside," he insisted, glaring daggers, trying to telepathically chastise Naruto with questions.

"How odd," Kakashi pondered, and Sasuke clenched his teeth. "We figured we'd give you the chance to run away. But if you would prefer to come inside, we can do that too." He was smiling that fake smile, the one that he always used when he was trying to manipulate someone. Though it was unsettling, Sasuke took it as a sign that the door coming out of the ground would lead into where they would be eating.

All he would have to do is act surprised when he saw the table. Sure enough, Kakashi led them through the door and down a set of stairs. A dark curtain was pulled back, revealing an intimate dinner spread in a small room; a hostess with a bottle of sake ushered them in. The sound of dishes clanking faintly reached Sasuke's ears past another set of curtains. They had a private booth. Perfect.

It wouldn't do to have Kakashi think he hadn't won, so Sasuke glared at him. "What are you doing?" he spat convincingly.

Boisterously, Naruto tossed an arm around Sasuke's shoulders, pulling him further in the room. "Your note said to meet you some place private! This is private, and we get to eat!" He turned his glare on the idiot, whose arm felt exceptionally heavy on top of him.

"Is this not okay? I tried to tell them you probably didn't want us to do all this," Sakura consoled, hopping in front of them to worry. "You must have something important to say. Is

everything okay?"

He swallowed thickly at her intense concern, his glare now decidedly at the ground. "I-I-…" shit. He implored that idiot to say something, anything, like he had instructed him to do when Sakura tried to get him to talk to early. As the seconds ticked by, he had no choice but to fix his eyes on Naruto, who startled.

"Uh- C-Come on, Sakura, let's sit down for a bit before all that!" He waved at her, lightly pushing against her shoulders to usher her toward the table. "We've got all this food to get through!"

A fist collided with the side of Naruto's head as Sakura turned to nag, "Don't be so insensitive! Is food all you think about?!"

As Sasuke watched Naruto cower, he couldn't help being grateful that Naruto was Naruto; anyone who was naturally more astute would have been suspicious acting this way. Having his part to play, Sasuke clenched his jaw, letting his embarrassment show. But only slightly. At the table, Kakashi chuckled. "Sakura, don't worry. We've got all night," he turned to Sasuke. "Unless, of course, you had somewhere else you'd rather be?"

Predictable. Cornering him by guilt. It felt good knowing that Sasuke was turning Kakashi's manipulation tactic back against him. He tutted at the ground in response, still keeping his embarrassed façade. "Fine," he spat, taking his (pre-determined) seat across from his old teacher and sitting on the ground in a huff. Kakashi *had* called him a moody teenager last time, after all.

And now all Naruto had to do was excitedly take his seat next to him, on a diagonal from his old teacher; this would be the best angle for Naruto to be in for getting a clear view of Kakashi's face without being directly in front of him. It was diagonal by Kakashi's left eye, which would have been an issue in the past, but thankfully that eye was no longer Sharingan. This might have been impossible had he still had his Sharingan. Regardless, it wasn't so much about staying out of Kakashi's sight as it was distracting him from sensing the surge of chakra that came with Sage mode.

"Alright! Let's eat!" Naruto finally piped up just as Sasuke started to worry that Sakura was going to take his seat. But thankfully he reached it just moments before her, nearly pushing her aside.

He made it obvious. "Naruto!" Sakura scolded. "I was-..." she trailed off, fortunately, looking dejected, but taking the seat next to Kakashi. "Never mind." Sasuke was glad that she didn't put up a fight; he didn't feel like being mean to her tonight, and he would have had to interrupt at some point.

With the seating in order, Sasuke had nothing left to do but dwell on what was to be said. Thankfully he had time to spare acting nervous as they all began to fill their plates, banking on Naruto to fill the silence, which he did. Perhaps too much, but maybe that wasn't so bad. Kakashi, predictably, was only scrutinizing Sasuke; thankfully their old teacher had plenty of practice tuning out Naruto's prattle that it became second nature. It would work in their favor tonight.

So then Sasuke waited, and he wondered at first how long it would take, but sure enough some ten minutes passed and Sakura interrupted Naruto's babbling, staring fixated and determined at Sasuke. "Naruto," she scolded, "you're making this hard for Sasuke. Can't you see he wants to say something?"

It was the moment, then. Expertly, Sasuke averted his gaze to the floor opposite where Naruto was sitting, successfully drawing everyone else's attention with him. He meant to speak here, but for some reason when he opened his mouth, nothing but a small, choked sound came out. He clenched his jaw. Why could he feel heat coming up to his cheeks, now? This was not part of the plan. The *stupid* plan. Why had he agreed to this?

A weight hit his shoulders at the way Kakashi was looking at him. "Don't be getting bashful for the first time in your life, now."

Crap. There were real butterflies in his stomach. He cursed at himself for not being able to come up with a better excuse for wanting to talk to his old team. But everything else he had come up with was either too engaging or out of character for Sasuke to go to all of the trouble. No, this was the only thing. It *had* to be something he would be embarrassed to ask. It had to be superficial, but not out of character. Swallowing the lump in his throat, Sasuke managed, "I'm turning 18 soon."

Feeling the rest of the team's eyes blinking slowly at him, Sasuke tried to formulate the cover story he had meticulously prepared. It took him longer than anticipated. "Yeah, on the 23rd, right?" Sakura fed him.

Before the pain in his stomach got any worse, Sasuke found himself blurting out, "My clan used to have a tradition," and feeling the heat escalade in his face. It hit him now that this was, in fact, out of character for him. He would *never* do something this embarrassing.

"Oh?" Kakashi reacted, intrigued.

He kept his face turned away from Naruto to draw attention elsewhere, but made sure Kakashi was in his peripherals. "For our 18th birthday we would hold a bit of a ceremony. There used to be a tree in our part of the village. Members of the immediate family would be there to take a leaf off of it and light a floating lantern with it in honor of the Uchiha who lived to be an adult. I don't... think that the tree is still there anymore, though."

The rest of the table went chillingly silent, and Sasuke felt like something was squirming up his spine. Speaking was starting to become painful at the thought, so he didn't. "It was a tradition for your clan?" Sakura mumbled almost to herself, which made Sasuke coil inward.

"I never knew you guys had that tradition," Kakashi all but marveled. Sasuke's ears perked, noting the way it *didn't* sound suspicious, how it was quiet and revered.

"We had a lot of traditions that we kept secret from the rest of the village," he supplied, and it wasn't a lie. "It wasn't anything big or flashy like some of our others, so I doubt you would have heard about it."

As out of character as Sasuke thought this plan was, now, it seemed to be working, so he was forced to concede that maybe it *wasn't* too out of character. At least of what Kakashi and Sakura saw of him. Now was Naruto's moment to enter Sage mode, while Kakashi was completely engaged and absentmindedly picking at his plate, piecing together Sasuke's narrative. Any moment now he would choose to take a bite, too distracted by the notion that Sasuke-

"You want us to go with you, in place of your family."

Rage boiled inside him as he involuntarily snapped his head toward Naruto. The moment- the precious moment where no one would possibly be paying attention to him, the reason Sasuke was sitting here making an absolute fool of himself- vanished as a Shadow Clone pierced by a blade. The absolute *idiot*. He completely lost sight of the entire point of tonight, falling for the façade he had *known* Sasuke was going to be planting.

No, it wasn't over. Sasuke wasn't going to let this slip up ruin the plan. They had barely started dinner. He glared at Naruto, sending waves of his inner thoughts over until he *finally* seemed to understand, his big blue eyes going round before casting away. Scoffing, Sasuke now settled with the fact that he would have to stretch this out longer than he should have had to. He made his mind up on the best way to do so on the spot. "Whatever. Forget about it," he spat as he stood up, not quite having to act out his desire to flee.

As predicted, Sakura stood up with him, desperately flinging herself across the table for a long, awkward reach at his sleeve, which he allowed her to grab. "Wait- Sasuke! We would all *love* to come to your ceremony. Why don't' you- tell us more about it, a bit, so we know what to do." In reality, that wouldn't have kept Sasuke from leaving. But it seemed to be the best she had to offer, so he sat back down, wishing that he hadn't blushed *this* much.

"I won't say I'm not surprised," Kakashi spoke evenly, and Sasuke surveyed him. "But I'm certainly touched."

Oh, no. Sasuke knew what was coming. "Whatever," he found himself saying again, disgruntled at what he knew was about to happen.

"I mean, for us to take the part of a coveted Uchiha tradition, and play the part of your family, no less! It's truly an honor for us outsiders. I had no idea you thought of us that way!" His eyes shut happily, indicating that he was smiling under his mask. "Say, does that make me the father?"

Sasuke envisioned abandoning the plan in favor of smacking Kakashi in the face with the blunt side of the table.

"I kid- I kid! I'm much too young for that!" Kakashi teased.

Begrudgingly, Sasuke was forced to realize that the plan was working. This was the exact mood Sasuke knew he needed to have their old teacher in for him to completely ignore the change in chakra flow coming from beside them. As Sakura scolded their teacher for making light of what *'must have been really hard for Sasuke to ask of them'*, Kakashi shrugged almost gleefully.

And then he did it, Sasuke watching carefully with the Rinnegan- something he would see regardless of if he wanted to or not. As if in slow motion, Kakashi's fingers danced over the top of his mask, chopsticks with a dumpling in hand. All Sasuke could do was urge Naruto in his mind, but finally the wave of chakra came through. Yes. Kakashi, unthinking, carefree, unaware somehow that his normal blabbermouth student was going to beat him at stealth for the first time in their lives, pulled down the front of his mask.

The moment was as quick as it always was, but with Sasuke's eye he could pause the moment in time for just long enough. The scar running most of the way down his cheek. A thin, straight nose. A smile perhaps a little wider than anticipated, accompanied with that small dot just under the corner of it on his left side.

Then the mask was back up. Sasuke's heart felt like it had stopped beating from the anticipation. Had they done it? Had Kakashi noticed that surge of chakra? The surge of chakra was still present- why had Naruto not reverted yet? Logically, he knew only milliseconds had passed- but those were milliseconds that Kakashi would absolutely pick up on. What was that idiot doing?

Quickly, Sasuke gave a swift punch to Naruto's thigh under the table. Naruto startled, but managed to revert from Sage mode only *just* in time, the idiot. Kakashi, who had carelessly had his eyes closed in that smug expression the entire time, had not seen anything. But that didn't mean he couldn't smell the chakra with that superior nose of his.

Sure enough, Sasuke could see Kakashi's nose twitch. Damn it. "Naruto?" Kakashi asked, his mouth still full of dumpling, and it was all Sasuke could do but tell himself to not panic.

For some reason, Naruto hid his face in the direction opposite of both his teacher and Sasuke. "I- err. Uh. Bathroom," he excused lamely, all but bolting into the bustling restaurant.

Sasuke stared at his empty seat, bewildered.

"What's with him, all of a sudden?" Sakura mused, eyebrows knitted in confusion.

Scoffing, Sasuke did his best to control the anger in him that was flaring at Naruto. What the hell was he doing? Had he managed to see Kakashi's face? How was Sasuke supposed to play this off? "Who knows," Sasuke settled on, crossing his arms bitterly at the fact that sure, *Naruto* was allowed to flee from this awful conversation while Sasuke was stuck here, alone. What could he possibly be thinking to leave like that? Would Kakashi be able to figure out what had just happened?

But instead of analyzing Naruto, Kakashi was watching Sasuke with a concerningly leveled expression. "I figured *you*, of all people, would be able to understand, Sasuke." This had Sasuke blinking up to his old teacher. What the hell did that mean? It was easy now to see the ghost of his face under the mask when the image was still so fresh in his mind. "What it's like when you're an orphan to have someone call you family."

Sasuke's body didn't feel like his own. Logically he knew that the nails digging into his bicep were his, but neither the pain in his fingers nor his bicep seemed to belong to him. How absurd. As if Kakashi knew what the goal for this dinner had actually been. As if both he and

Naruto hadn't just beaten him at a game he didn't even know they were playing. Like the lie Sasuke had planted was real, like Naruto wasn't just as in on Sasuke's lie as he was. Family. Orphans.

Whatever.

But that still begged the question as to why Naruto had deserted him so suddenly. Certainly Naruto knew Sasuke had made everything up. Did Naruto think that bullshit ceremony was real, let alone something Sasuke would want to partake in with anyone other than his long since dead parents and brother? Or had something else happened that deterred the plan? Had Naruto even been able to see their old teacher's face?

Unable to leave these questions unanswered for another moment, Sasuke stood up briskly, annoyed beyond reason that the idiot was making him do this. "I'm gunna go find him."

Damn Naruto. Making him play the part of an orphan longing for his dead family, making him weak in front of his old teammates. Letting Kakashi think he was getting the better of him. Letting Sakura think he was this emotionally driven. As he stalked through the busy restaurant, he added '*making me show my face to all these other people'* to the list.

Pushing the swinging door of the bathroom aside, Sasuke found Naruto staring desolately into the sink, water wastefully flowing down the drain. It looked like he had splashed his face with it before forgetting he lived on this plane of existence. "Oi. Dumbass," Sasuke deadpanned.

Unprepared, Sasuke flinched backwards as suddenly Naruto was in his face, the water from the tap still flowing. "*Why didn't you warn me*?!"

"I- uh. What?" Naruto's face was close to his, looking hysterical, and it was unnerving on multiple levels. Heart fluttering in panic, Sasuke thought of the worst. Had Naruto actually been *this* affected by Sasuke fake-insinuating a familial bond? Did Naruto think he had been *serious*? Sasuke had not considered that he might have to warn his teammate about what topic he was going to use to distract their teacher.

"Kakashi-sensei!"

Now Sasuke was thoroughly confused.

"*Why didn't you tell me that he was hot*?!"

Sasuke was having an out of body experience.

Naruto, oblivious, continued to rip at his hair, now pacing back and forth. "Like, I always knew that Kakashi-sensei was attractive, but I always thought that it was just the mystery of not knowing what his face actually looked like! I mean, how was I supposed to know that what he was hiding all of this time lived up to expectations? It's bad enough that he's such a good fighter and effortlessly cool, let alone the fact that he's also *Hokage*- but that he's actually *that* attractive under his mask?!" He huffed out, crouching down on the ground with his hands over his head as if trying to protect himself from something. "He's the second most

attractive guy I've ever seen!" Naruto whined, then suddenly turning around to give the biggest stink eye back toward Sasuke. "Right behind *you*."

'*Right behind you*.' Rooted in his spot, Sasuke tried to piece together this new information, but nothing was lining up. His brain was desolate.

Naruto let out a noise of frustration, clamping his head again before turning around on the dirty bathroom floor to pout bitterly up at Sasuke, his bottom lip, so pink, jutting out in frustration. "You could have at least warned me! I almost had a heart attack!"

His arm was in front of him in defense, but there was no way he could block this absurd attack. "W-What are you *talking* about, dumbass?!" he said through the sandpaper in his throat. "H-He's not- *that* attractive!"

At Sasuke's words, Naruto's demeanor fell with his shoulders, replaced with something akin to defeat. "'*Not that attractive'*," Naruto repeated in a squeaky mumble. "Of course he's 'not that attractive' to *you*. Look at you." He gestured vaguely to Sasuke's pathetic defensive stance, his last three words feeling like physical damage to both of them.

"D-Don't say weird stuff!" Sasuke attempted to bring some sanity back to the conversation.

But Naruto ignored him, slumping down further on the ground by leaning his face against a stall wall, just as unsettling to watch as it was unsanitary. "You don't understand what it's like for the rest of us just trying to get by."

What the *hell* was he talking about?

"It's no wonder he keeps his face hidden!" Naruto exclaimed, the fire back in him in a way that gave Sasuke whiplash. "Can you imagine if he strutted around this place with that face?! He'd be mobbed by every woman in the country! He wouldn't be able to leave his house! *You* can get away with it because your personality's piss poor and scares everyone away. Imagine if you were also like, a nice guy."

This- was an impossible conversation. There was no way this conversation was happening. Despite himself, Sasuke couldn't keep the innumerous memories of all of the girls who have thrown themselves at him at bay. The memories only frustrated him more, because who the hell *cared* what he looked like, and who the hell cared what Kakashi looked like? Why did it matter? Why was Naruto on the floor having a mental breakdown over it- over Kakashi? What on earth possessed Naruto that made him have such an opinion on either of their appearances? And if it did matter, why did Naruto think he was so beneath them?

Sasuke banished his train of thought. Clenching his teeth, he felt his lip twitch. "Oi. Get up off of the ground."

"I don't want to talk to you and your pretty-boy face," Naruto pouted, beyond reason.

"S-Stop saying weird things!" Sasuke shouted, too loudly. Catching himself, Sasuke ran his hand absent mindedly through his bangs, pushing them back. For some reason, Naruto only squinted harder at him as he did it. "Get off the ground!" he demanded again, because damn

it if he didn't take control of this conversation. "They think we're getting emotional in here because we're both orphans. We have to go out before they think anything else more embarrassing."

Naruto was silent for a moment, still squinting. "…What?"

Sighing out his anger, Sasuke bent down to yank on Naruto's wrist and pull him up to his feet. "Come on. Don't fuck this up and make it more suspicious than you already have."

"I can't go out there!" Naruto exclaimed, pulling his arm out of Sasuke's grip once he had his balance again. "I'm not going to be able to look Kakashi-sensei in the face-mask for a month!"

"Get over yourself!" Sasuke implored him, "You're going to blow this whole mission! We can't let Kakashi know we plotted all this so that you can see his face! Not when we're winning!"

"He had a trump card. I walked right into his trump card," Naruto said shakily, as if the realization was doing him damage. "This is the price I have to pay for looking at forbidden things."

"Naruto!" Sasuke gripped Naruto's left arm, shaking him in the hopes that some sense would be stirred up in him.

"Looking at you this close only makes it worse."

Like he was burned, Sasuke let go of Naruto's upper arm. Something thick and slimy wiggled around in his stomach, making him almost nauseous. He had to mentally tell himself to breathe, in and out, control his heartbeat. How dumb. He was annoyed, that's all. "So then go out there and don't look at anyone, then," he spat. "Let them think it's because you're in shock. What the hell do I care."

He left the bathroom before it crushed inward on them. He didn't care if Naruto was following him, but he *better* have been following him. He was in no place to make any sense of the redundancy, instead choosing to find his way back to the table.

Naruto followed him like a marionette.

_o-O-o_

It was by the grace of the universe it didn't all blow up in their faces. Sasuke couldn't contemplate how their exact demeanor could reflect the reality Kakashi and Sakura believed, as it only made sense to him in theory. Naruto couldn't keep eye contact with any of them because he realized he had a found family, and all that crap. He was realizing Sasuke thought of him like a brother. Whatever. Let them believe that Naruto was that kind of sap. The grating thing was them somehow believing that Sasuke could possibly be on that same, sappy, drippy, syrupy level. Did they not know him? Sasuke *had* a brother. He didn't want another one to even attempt to live up to him.

The meal ended, somehow Kakashi being the most enthusiastic of all of them. At least it meant that he was completely oblivious. Mission: success. A small consolation- except not at all. Sasuke was eager to leave, disappearing the moment they set foot outside without a goodbye to any of them. He didn't want to wait around to hear Kakashi say something awful about families and orphans again.

He had every intention of leaving the village, but as he approached the gate, he could feel that stupid thick slimy thing back in his stomach. Like a snake. Naruto's words echoed in him, calling him 'pretty boy' and somehow insinuating that he was the most attractive man he had ever seen. What the *fuck* did that even mean?

Sasuke knew he had what other people thought was an appealing face. He never understood what they meant. What makes someone attractive? What makes someone fall into a panic attack in a public restroom by simply seeing their face? He tried to imagine what Naruto had seen that was so different than what Sasuke had; Kakashi's face was- symmetrical? His skin was smooth, he guessed. His nose was center and kind of tall on his face. But what did any of those attributes *mean*? And how did Sasuke's face compare in such ways to be somehow considered 'better'?

Damn Naruto. It was frustrating enough when it was just girls who flocked to him, giggling superficially and trying to demand his attention, all because they thought he was pleasing to look at. Why would he want to be kind to those people, who only wanted to talk to him because of the way he looks? But Naruto somehow having an opinion on it- that was something different. They knew each other, inside and out. They could read each other so perfectly in battle, and even out of it. Naruto had never commented on finding Sasuke's face appealing in any way, before. There had been plenty of moments where he seemed to resent Sasuke for the way he looked, for the way those girls would throw themselves at him because of it. But that was jealousy over something stupid about wanting that kind of attention for himself. He was forced to concede that it had to be some type of universal fact that he was attractive; if Naruto of all people truly thought so- and by the way he was so close to some weird breaking point, he did- then perhaps it was a reality that he just couldn't understand.

It wouldn't do to dwell on this. It was all meaningless. But still, the snake in his stomach wrenched. It was getting late. Sasuke would have to find someplace to set up camp for the night. He turned back longingly, thinking of the mattress. He had slept in that bed just last night. There was no way he'd let himself have that kind of luxury two nights in a row, as tempting as it was. And besides, Naruto would say more dumb things tonight.

He found himself pushing the window open again. Naruto was on his bed, hugging his pillow to his chest and pouting with that pink lip. "I still don't want to talk to you," he scowled in lieu of a greeting, making no other indication of having noticed Sasuke's presence.

"I don't want to talk to you, either," Sasuke replied, already shaking out the pajama bottoms that he had worn last night, unruffling them from their crumpled place on the floor.

They didn't exchange a word for half an hour, Sasuke opting to take another bath while he still had hot water at his disposal. He had just taken one last night. He ignored this fact. He also ignored the way Naruto had his back to him when he returned, spooning the pillow, until he was faced with the reality that he would have to use that pillow to sleep.

“Let me have that pillow,” he stated more than asked.

For a moment, Sasuke didn’t think he was going to give it to him. But then Naruto tossed it up by the headboard on Sasuke’s side, stubbornly mumbling, “It’s *my* pillow,” as he did.

“Whatever,” Sasuke responded, pointedly facing the wall as he laid down. The moment his head hit the pillow, a rush of Naruto’s smell hit his nose, wafting out from it. Frustrated, he tried to ignore it.

Eventually Naruto got up, and by the rustling noise it sounded like he had gotten changed right there behind him. Sasuke didn’t turn around to see. The light now off, Sasuke forced himself to at least *enjoy* the wonderful mattress under him, the plushness he should not have been experiencing for two nights in a row. He sighed. Whatever.

Just as he was starting to truly relax, inching closer to that beautiful sleep he craved, Naruto spoke, somber, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Sasuke’s eyes shot open. He clenched his fist into the pillow where his hand was laying. “We’re not going to have this weird conversation again.”

“No- I meant-” Naruto flustered, “I meant the ceremony.”

Bewildered, Sasuke’s body turned over in his confusion without any direction from his logical mind. “What are you talking about?”

“You should have told me before dinner about your clan’s tradition, so that I could have been more prepared. I almost forgot the mission. I think it’s really cool that you want us to be there for that.”

“Naruto,” Sasuke said sternly, and Naruto faced him, blond eyelashes barely glistening from the lights of the village outside streaming in through the window. “I made it up.”

Naruto blanched. “What do you *mean* you made it up?!” He exclaimed, too noisy for the previously hushed room.

“Of course I made it up!” Sasuke paralleled his volume. “The Uchiha never had a tradition so shallow!”

He was whining again. “So you mean you *didn’t* want to entrust us with standing in for your family?”

“My family’s dead. Why would I want people to imitate them?” Suddenly the room was quiet again. Sasuke found Naruto’s dejected expression. “What?” he demanded.

Shrugging, Naruto fixated on a stray thread at the corner of his pillow. “I don’t know. Sometimes it’s nice, when I’m around Iruka-sensei.”

So Naruto *was* a sap. Not that Sasuke had any doubt, but he had expected to have a more similar disposition about this topic after everything they had been through and said in battle.

They did not consider each other brothers. “It’s different for you and me,” he reminded darkly.

“Yeah, it is,” Naruto agreed heavily. Good. At least he was still aware of that fact. “I don’t know what it’s like to have a brother.” No, he didn’t. There was still a part of Sasuke that resented Naruto for that; he wasn’t sure anymore if it was because he didn’t have to experience the pain of losing one or not. Perhaps now it had morphed into something different, he realized, remembering Kakashi’s words from earlier in the night. Perhaps it had something to do with having the choice of finding a family on his own; but that was a fucked up way of looking at it, so Sasuke chose not to. “But I think I’ve learned a lot about it.”

Humorlessly, Sasuke huffed a dry chuckle, “Is that so?”

“From hearing your brother’s story.” Sasuke blinked at him in the darkness. He was facing the ceiling, left hand still picking at the thread absentmindedly. “I can see why he did what he did to protect you.”

His chest felt like there were weights on top of it at the topic. He hummed something that was supposed to be disengaged, a bit unsuccessfully.

“I think I might have done the same thing if I were him.”

“No you wouldn’t have,” Sasuke shut down immediately. Despite himself, he found that it was hard to not smirk. “You would have found some idiotic way to save *everyone*.”

At this, Naruto grinned widely, meeting Sasuke’s gaze. “Yeah, actually, I would.” It was too painful to imagine that situation, but somehow Sasuke was still suppressing the upward quirk of his lips. What an awful thing to think about. “But I meant more along the lines of doing anything necessary to protect you.”

The snake was back again, slimy and thick, coiling around in his stomach. Sasuke swallowed roughly, finding it easier to keep it at bay if he closed his eyes. Anything necessary to protect him. That may be true in Naruto’s sense of the word ‘anything’, but Sasuke knew the reality of that word better than him, though perhaps that wasn’t so much of a fault of Naruto’s. “You still wouldn’t choose my life over anyone else’s, though,” he struggled to not marvel at the fact. “You would save us all.”

“Well, everyone’s life is important,” Naruto agreed, and Sasuke opened his eyes at the wrong moment. “Especially yours, though.”

Naruto was staring at him so determinedly. The snake in his stomach didn’t feel so out of place anymore. Sasuke closed his eyes again, hoping that it was at least dark enough that his failed attempt at suppressing his smile wasn’t so noticeable. “Dumbass,” he called him.

“I’m still mad at you for not telling me about Kakashi-sensei, though.”

“You- I-” Sasuke flustered, the moment shattered. “*Dumbass*,” he called again, harsher this time. “Why are you bringing that up again?!”

“I thought we were friends, and you just let me walk blindly into that,” he pouted, infuriatingly.

Exasperated and wishing for this bed to work its magic and put him into another coma, Sasuke rubbed the ache behind his eyes. “I have no idea what you’re talking about when you say that.”

“Oh, come on, Sasuke!” Naruto goaded. “You have to have been in awe the first time you saw his face too!”

“No, I really wasn’t,” Sasuke assured. Smug, yes. Awe? No.

Naruto sighed, grumbling, “It’s not fair that you aren’t affected like the rest of us.”

“Affected by *what*?” Sasuke beseeched him.

“Hot people,” Naruto explained, and Sasuke’s eye twitched. “Like, you have Sakura and Ino following you around like puppies, and you just have the balls to ignore them, somehow, as if they weren’t the two prettiest girls in our class. You can have anyone you wanted, but you push everyone away like they don’t affect you. Even my Harem Jutsu never worked on you!”

It was too much to focus on. “That jutsu is stupid.”

“That jutsu almost saved the world, if you remember.” Sasuke did remember. He didn’t want to. “But enough about that, I mean, does *no one* make you feel like you have butterflies in your stomach?”

He could feel his body go numb at the question. Well, all except for the snake. Not butterflies. He didn’t let himself stammer for long before scoffing. “Why would I feel like that from looking at someone?”

Shrugging, Naruto waved his hand, stating as if it was simple, “Some people are pretty.”

Pretty.

“Like who?” Sasuke asked, for some reason.

“A lot of people,” Naruto answered, then expanded. “Sakura and Ino, and Kakashi-sensei, of course, he always was but now it’s just ridiculous. Gaara is, too, and so was Neji. Hinata is really pretty, now that I think about it. And Tsunade-baa-chan, but then you remember that she’s actually ancient and it gets creepy.” He lists them off like it was obvious. “Pretty much all of our friends are. Tenten and Kiba. I think even Lee is pretty, bushy-brows and all. Sometimes I would think that the people we fight were, too, even though a lot of them made me really mad. The first time I saw your brother, I couldn’t help thinking that he was really nice to look at, even though he had been trying to capture me at the time. He was easily your second, but now that I’ve seen Kakashi-sensei’s face, I can’t decide who’s prettier.” Sasuke shouldn’t have asked. He didn’t even know who half of those people Naruto had just mentioned were. “Oh, and then, of course, there’s you.”

And then, of course, there's him. What was Sasuke supposed to do with this information? "What the hell does that even mean?"

He shrugged again. "I don't know."

Sasuke didn't know, either. "But you think I'm the-" he can't say that word, not in such a context, "*most*?"

"Definitely."

He sounded so sure when he said it, like it was nothing more than a fact. A fact that Sasuke was attractive. *Pretty*. Whatever. "But how?"

Naruto frowns, "What do you mean?"

"What makes me… *more* than anyone else? How is that even a thing?"

He considered it for a moment, and Sasuke all but flinched under the analyzing look Naruto gave him, as if he was scanning in the information of the planes of his face in the darkness of the room. Eventually, he cocked his head. "I don't know. I guess all of your features are in proportion. You're strong, but not bulky. I don't know. You're kind of feminine, in a way, but not like- girly, and for some reason it works in your favor. Your hair always looks good and as annoying as that cool act you display is, sometimes you pull it off enough that it ties everything together. But you're a really good fighter, and that's somehow part of it, I think."

The first micro-movement Sasuke could make was the twitch in his eye. He was able to avert his gaze, heat coming back up into his face for what felt like the hundredth time today. "That's stupid," he diverted. "Why would you let yourself be distracted by what people look like?"

Affronted, Naruto waved his hand defensively, "Well I don't do it on purpose. Not everyone is so used to seeing pretty people every day when they look in the mirror, so it catches us off guard!"

But it didn't add up at all. If Sasuke had to choose one person to give this arbitrary title of 'attractive' to, he would probably pick Naruto. But he couldn't pinpoint why he thought so. Was Naruto ugly? If you asked him when he was twelve, Sasuke probably would have said yes for the sole purpose of pissing him off. But in actuality, he wasn't, and Sasuke would have been lying. But it was still too foreign a concept, this idea that some people were 'pretty' enough to warrant giving a second thought about their appearance.

Regardless, the notion that Sasuke only thought like this because he was so above everyone else was ridiculous. He couldn't even pinpoint what about his appearance people seemed to like that was more preferable than others'. The mathematics of a symmetrical face, perhaps, with features in proportion with each other. Why was that more attractive?

What mattered more was who people were. Naruto was attractive to Sasuke because he was kind and passionate. He cared for everyone, when it came down to it, and he understood emotions in a way that made it easy to talk to him. He was also an idiot who jumped into

things too quickly and bit off more than he could chew, but he only did that because he knew that certain things were worth giving his all for. There was something in him that never knew when to quit, that always found a way to save everyone even at the cost of his own safety.

Naruto was the most attractive person he knew. He was the only person in this awful world who genuinely cared about making the world a better place. He gave people chances even when they didn't deserve them. That, Sasuke thought, was what made Naruto attractive.

What did Sasuke have in leverage against that?

"Physical appearances are irrelevant," he settled on replying.

Sighing deeply, Naruto lamented, "You probably don't even know what it's like to want to kiss someone."

Uncomfortable again, Sasuke was starting to think there was something wrong with him. There had to be something medically wrong with him, with how hot his face felt. Haunted, he recalled the memory of a month ago, when some demon had possessed him into stealing that kiss from Naruto as he slept. How soft his lips were against his own, the gentle yet somehow fierce color of them in the morning sun. For the millionth time, he berated himself for that moment of weakness. "This is a stupid conversation," he deflected.

"So you've actually never wanted to kiss someone before?" Naruto lamented anyway, rolling over halfway so that he was now facing Sasuke.

Sasuke couldn't say anything. To make matters worse, he could feel himself starting to sweat, staring over at the passionate expression Naruto was giving him as he tried to press himself further into the soft mattress. Naruto's bed, which Sasuke has been stealing away in far too often, choosing to delve into luxuries he never let himself enjoy before. Probably because Naruto was the only person who made him feel like he was *allowed* to experience those luxuries.

"Or- wait… *have* you kissed someone before?!" Naruto exclaimed.

The idiot. How did he get to that conclusion? "W- yeah! *You*!" Sasuke blurted before he was able to control himself, somehow his anger at how dumb Naruto was being making him forget that it probably wasn't wise to mention the past times they had kissed.

"Th-Those don't count! Those were accidents!" Naruto attempted, quickly waving his hands between them. "We didn't do it properly!"

Turning his face away, Sasuke grumbled. "This conversation is stupid," he repeated. Unable to stop himself, he added in a small voice. "And those were *your* fault."

"N-No they weren't!"

"Why did you even kiss me that first time?!"

"It was an accident! Someone pushed me!"

Squinting, Sasuke said in disbelief, “I don’t remember that.” He remembered the way Naruto had been glaring at him completely unprompted, the dramatic idiocy of getting in his face in a feeble attempt at seeming threatening. But then the way he had suddenly kissed him- Sasuke’s heart pounded at the thought. Stupid. But he couldn’t recall Naruto being pushed. Perhaps he fell or something, but the way Sasuke remembered it, Naruto had done it voluntarily.

“The guy in front of us knocked into me!”

Side-eyeing him, Sasuke considered this. Not that it would change anything. He had hated that kiss. And all of their other ones. They made no sense. “Whatever,” he said.

Naruto was quiet for just a moment, before asking, “So I’m the only person you’ve kissed?”

Irked, Sasuke spat, “So, what?”

Confusingly, Naruto laughed, sounding weirdly smug about it. “So, that means people are jealous of me!”

“What’s so special about kissing that people get jealous about it?” Sasuke asked.

Thinking for a moment, Naruto hummed. “Well I mean, it feels good. And it’s better when the person you’re kissing is hot. But I wouldn’t really know, because our kisses always kind of hurt. It would probably have felt better if it was intentional.” Naruto’s lips had been soft. He remembered the shock of it, the electricity generated that he still couldn’t decipher. It did feel better when it was intentional. His insides squirmed again at the memory. “I’ve never kissed anyone intentionally.”

Bitter, for some reason, Sasuke snapped, “Kissing is a waste of time.”

This made Naruto frown. “I don’t think it is.”

Scoffing, Sasuke huffed, “What do people gain from it?”

“…Pleasure?” Naruto said as if it was a question. He then rolled onto his side fully. “You don’t think that it felt good, when we kissed? I mean, I was kinda grossed out, you know, because it was *you*, but it didn’t feel bad.”

No, it didn’t feel bad. Especially the one Naruto didn’t know about. But like hell Sasuke would admit it. “It’s like you said: they just kind of hurt.”

“Yeah, because they were all like we crash landed into each other,” Naruto laughed, as if he didn’t think the memories of them kissing were bad at all. “You know, when you were gone, I used to think back on them. Like, when they happened it was so weird, but for some reason when I remember them, it just felt like another bond that we shared. I don’t think I would change anything about them, even though they did hurt a bit.”

Sasuke blinked for a few moments, taking Naruto’s words in. Naruto was on his side facing Sasuke, who was on his back and staring at the ceiling. It was just another bond that they shared. Truth be told, Sasuke had done everything he could to try to forget those memories.

He failed at every attempt. Naruto, the annoying little brat that he was, always managed to weasel his way into Sasuke's psyche. Despite himself, he could feel the corner of his lips quirking. "I would change having our hands stuck together for those three days."

Only now did Naruto remember. "Ah- yeah, actually. That wasn't great." He said sheepishly. "But I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a part of me that kind of liked having you so close. Even though at the time there was a bigger part of me that hated it." He laughed as Sasuke tried to make sense of any of that. That wasn't to say he didn't feel the same way, just that it didn't make it any easier to understand. "I like when you're here," he said, open. Honest. This was somehow worse than Kakashi's brand of premeditated guilt. This was truer, more genuine. Naruto didn't mean to use it as a weapon; this was how he really felt. It sort of made Sasuke feel sick. "I know that you still don't feel like you're a part of this village, and that's okay. We're going to change the way this place works, and then you'll be able to feel more a part of it." 'We,' he said, as if it wasn't something he was planning all on his own. Sasuke knew that he would do it, too. This damn kid never understood the meaning of giving up.

Naruto would come through on his promises; he always did. And Sasuke was almost dependent on it.

He could inherit the Hokage position (because everyone knew it was a definite, at this point,) and coast by as the most powerful person in the village. Instead, Naruto was planning on rebuilding the system so that kids didn't have to grow up without their families. He wanted to end the cycle of war and hatred between countries, giving people less animosity toward each other. And Sasuke knew he would succeed, because of course he would. He was Naruto, and he promised it. As soon as he set his mind to something, he found a way to make it happen. He once made an equally unlikely promise that he would bring Sasuke back, and here he was. There wasn't anything-

Sasuke didn't need his always active Rinnegan to see it. For a moment, just barely, Naruto had looked at his lips. It was dark, of course, so there was no telling that Naruto was even able to see any of the features on his face. At some point a few neighbors must have shut off their porch lights, because it was darker than earlier. But there was a sliver of light that Sasuke could use to differentiate Naruto's expressions, and there was absolutely no denying where his line of sight had just travelled.

Sasuke's heart was thumping up near his throat, and he wasn't sure if it had gotten better as Naruto averted his gaze to the ceiling, still laying on his side. Naruto seemed to want to bring the atmosphere back to where it was before it became heavy, and piped, "Well, at least you don't have to worry about what you eat giving you bad breath, considering you never want to kiss anyone else again!"

It felt like Sasuke had just tried to swallow a mouthful of honey. "I-I… didn't say that."

Fuck. "Oh?" Naruto said, a sly grin overcoming him. "But I thought you said kissing was stupid?"

"It *is* stupid," Sasuke insisted raptly, his voice raising involuntarily.

“But that doesn’t mean you don’t want to do it!” Naruto goaded, and Sasuke aimed a forceful, backhanded fist to his dumb head. Of course, Naruto caught it. “This could make headline, news, Sasuke! We could put out an ad in the paper for kissing candidates and make a record gathering the largest crowd the village has ever had!” Sasuke didn’t need another arm for his next attack. He had his eyes for that. For something like this, Sasuke found that he didn’t mind using genjutsu, something he normally avoided. He gave the idiot three seconds of memories of select moments in time where Sasuke had landed some particularly nice hits on him. It was too short of time for Naruto to be able to snap out of it on his own.

When he came back, he whined, “That’s not fair, Sasuke!” But Sasuke disagreed. He was too lazy to get up from this ungodly comfortable bed to do the actual physical damage that Naruto deserved for being an idiot. Squinting at Sasuke bitterly, Naruto slewed, “You know what, I bet you’re not even *good* at kissing!”

Sasuke’s eye twitched. “Wha- Who cares about that?!”

“I bet you’d be an awful kisser!” he insisted, his childish nature at its peak. Perhaps the genjutsu had been a little too much, if this was how Naruto was going to react about it. It was only three seconds. But then again, Naruto has always been quite the sore loser. “Yeah, you’d be too concerned with how stupid you thought it was!” Heat flared in Sasuke’s chest. “You know, I could totally run around town telling everyone how bad of a kisser you are! It’s not like anyone else would know!”

“I could do the same for you, dumbass!” Sasuke retorted. How had they got here? Naruto and his ridiculous obsession with kissing. “You’re the one who went off on how fondly you remember kissing me.”

“Th-That didn’t mean I thought the kisses themselves were any good!”

“That’s because they weren’t real! You said it yourself- they didn’t count!”

“No, it was because you’re bad at kissing!”’

He was infuriating. “Shut up, dumbass!”

“Make me, you bastard!”

He wasn’t aware of his next move. One moment he was seething, heat basically radiating from his ears. The next, Naruto was under him, soft lips yielding to him. Air filled his lungs almost too rapidly, rushing in from his nose and making him dizzy. Stupid Naruto. Like Sasuke was bad at *anything*. He could be good at kissing, even if kissing was-

Really, really good. Up this close, he could smell him clearer than what had wafted from the pillow, something sweet and salty and rich; it was a scent that Sasuke didn’t remember having memorized, but he had to have, because there was nostalgia to it. He remembered this scent from multiple occasions. The vast number of times they had gotten into each other’s faces in the heat of battle, both physical and argumentative. All of their past kisses. Now that he thought about it, that first time they had seen each other after the three years since Sasuke left- they had been so close, and Sasuke remembered noting the scent then, too, but he hadn’t

put it into mental words. It was confusing at the time, but now that he didn't have to push the bond they had away, he could tell that it was comforting.

Naruto was comforting.

Whatever the hell he was doing, kissing or whatever, it felt like something on the backburner of his mind. More confusing was the fact that there didn't seem to be anything on the front one. It felt like his body was clocking the information and simply storing it without the need for thinking about it. Naruto had made a noise of surprise at first, but he quickly stilled. His lips were pliant, but his body ridged. He was breathing heavily through his nose in a staccato rhythm.

Sasuke didn't quite pull away, but he stopped the physical press of their lips, a soft, embarrassing wet noise sounding out between them. With the loss of contact Sasuke could recognize that electric feeling again, whatever the hell that was. While it did feel like chakra he could tell that it wasn't, or perhaps it was such a miniscule amount-

There was a hand fisting in his hair at the back of his head, just above the nape of his neck, pulling him back down. This time Naruto surged forward, and Sasuke gasped before they connected again. It was different; Naruto's lips were slightly open, and Sasuke's hadn't had time to close his either. Naruto was leading this, no longer rigid as he had been a moment ago, initiating more movement than the simple press of lips they had done just prior. Sasuke had to have been panicking with the way that his heart was throbbing painfully in his chest. When Naruto had his bottom lip between his own, he was faced with the reality of just *how* good kissing felt. It surprised him, making him falter; this was such a distraction that Sasuke found himself allowing Naruto to switch their positions so that Sasuke was the one pressed into the mattress.

It was then that he realized he was losing this battle. A fact that he would not let continue for a moment longer. So open mouths were a more effective way to kiss, then. Fisting the t-shirt at Naruto's front, Sasuke let his jaw fall farther, pulling them both in deeper. Naruto fell against his chest at that, and Sasuke knew it hadn't been on purpose- which should mean that his attacked worked, but the weight of him was so dizzying that it must have backfired.

Even more dizzying was Naruto's tongue, which had licked into his mouth. The thought of it should have been utterly disgusting, but for some reason his body welcomed it. If that was a tactic he could use, he would, so he did; he pressed his own forward into Naruto's. He tasted like their dinner, which Sasuke didn't want to remember, and easily forgot about at the low groan Naruto gave. A sign of weakness, surely.

Groaning *was* a sign of weakness. He realized this when Naruto nibbled on his lower lip and he couldn't stop the noise from escaping the back of his throat. Naruto froze at the sound for only a moment before biting down a little firmer. More prepared this time, Sasuke pressed upward, his hand finding the back of Naruto's head to pull him down, as if it were even possible to get closer than they already were.

The snake in his stomach was doing something weird, flipping and turning over, writhing as though in pain. Naruto's hand on his neck and thumb over his Adam's apple was somehow part of the kiss, in the same way that Sasuke's grip in Naruto's hair was. The hand moved

lower, to the side of his ribs, thumb swiping along the front. How was there an electric charge from even that? How many times had Naruto touched him before, and how had it never once felt like *this*?

Well, maybe once or twice, he realized. But it had been more subtle, easier to deny. Those casual touches- how many times had he thrown an arm around Sasuke's shoulders? He had chalked it up to having found it bothersome to be touched like that, but he couldn't deny that it always felt a little different with Naruto. Regardless, this touch was intimate; it was not something he would do as congratulations on a good training session.

As he contemplated this, Naruto pulled back, and Sasuke felt himself gasp for air, having had been subconsciously holding his breath somehow. Was the kissing over? Is that why Naruto pulled back? Did this mean that Sasuke had won?

Definitely not. Sasuke went stiff as Naruto placed a trail of open kisses down to his- neck? Why was he going to kiss there?

Sasuke realized instantly why. As hot, wet, suckling contact came against the skin, Sasuke almost cried out. He stifled it only just in time. It had tickled, but when the sucking came it did something more than tickle. He swallowed thickly, his hand balling the cloth around Naruto's shoulder. It felt good, it felt ridiculously good. It would feel better a little farther up, just under his ear, but what was he supposed to do? Say that out loud? His body did it for him, stretching that side of his neck as if guiding Naruto to that spot. After a few moments, Naruto caught on.

It was harder to control himself that time. He had definitely made a sound at it. Sasuke's vision was starting to blur; it was easier to just keep his eyes closed than fight it. His head pressed into the pillow under it, back sinking low into the wonderfully soft mattress, and Naruto, with his sweet scent and hot mouth doing something like magic against his skin, pressed him further into it. Sasuke became boneless.

He had never felt safer.

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5

_o-O-o_

Waking up the next morning held the title for the most peaceful Sasuke had ever felt- something he didn't know he could top since he started sleeping in Naruto's bed. He hadn't remembered falling asleep. He remembered that they had kissed for a really long time, that Naruto found other spots at his neck, and then everything went fuzzy. He still felt like every muscle in his body had dissolved. Naruto was snoring loudly on his chest, the weight of him almost as comfortable as the mattress.

Even when the reality of it hit him, he didn't deny himself the comfort. He lay, coming to terms with what had transpired, but not bolting out of the window like he probably should have. How had it even happened? So much talking about kissing, and then arguing about kissing, and then actual kissing. It had become a battle between the two of them, trying to one-up each other like they did with nearly every other aspect of their lives. With a groan, Sasuke conceded that it was one competition that he had surely lost.

Scoffing to himself, he grinded his teeth together. Who cared, anyway. Kissing was stupid. He felt himself blush at the thought. It *was* stupid. They had spent at least an hour doing that, and what had they gained…

The thought of Naruto at his neck overcame him. Then, the recognition that he wanted Naruto to do exactly what he had done last night *again*. There was absolutely no logic to it at all. It had just- felt good. That was all.

Naruto slept for a long while, but Sasuke didn't have it in him to leave. Not that he could; he wasn't sure if even his sword embedded with Chidori would be able to pry the iron grip around his middle off. It wasn't so bad, though. It was, after all, the most comfortable he had ever felt. And there was a lot to think about.

At some point his hand began trailing along Naruto's back in slow, rhythmic motions, though Sasuke had no memory of when it had started or why. Naruto's back was rising and falling evenly under it, another pattern in the flow of the morning. The noise of the village beyond the window was distant and muffled. It did not disturb the flow, as Naruto's soft, snuffling snores had outshone it, keeping in time with the rise and fall.

Just as Sasuke had let himself close his eyes again, Naruto began to stir. It started with the fist on Sasuke's chest, which clenched the fabric of the t-shirt that Sasuke was borrowing. Then his face nuzzled downward, perhaps coming to terms with the reality of a heartbeat there. For a moment, Sasuke wished that he could see Naruto's face from this angle, but only the top of the blond head was visible. He supposed his blue eyes fluttered open; maybe bulging slightly as he took in where the morning had brought them.

As he lifted his head from Sasuke's chest, Naruto let out a soft noise of confusion. Sasuke raised his eyebrow in time for Naruto to make eye contact with him. His blue eyes *had* been wide, and had gone even wider at the shared glance.

He pulled back quickly, taking the morning with him.

“I-Uh,” he stuttered, his voice extra gravelly. Laughing nervously, he began to rub the back of his head. “Sorry! I’m used to- you know. I usually have a pillow to cuddle when I sleep!”

Right. Naruto was unaware that this wasn’t the first time Sasuke had woken up to Naruto’s arms around him; he had spent the past few months making sure he *didn’t* find out about that. Well. There goes that bit of illusion. He fought off the heat in his face, finding it easier to do if he wasn’t looking in Naruto’s direction. “It’s fine,” he said, already yearning for the peace he was in just moments before. Now everything just felt awkward.

“Anyway- let’s have breakfast!” With that, he had all but leaped off of the bed and out of the room. Even with his eyes, Sasuke had trouble following the movements. How was it possible that barely sixty seconds prior that kid was nearly unconscious? This did not match up to all of the memories of seeing Naruto in the morning in the past. He used to stumble to their early training sessions looking like death itself.

He found himself mentally saying a farewell to the mattress- something that he had been doing for about a month or so now every morning he left it. Sitting up, Sasuke was unnerved to notice the snake in his stomach again, the damn thing. He sighed to himself. It wouldn’t do. Entering the kitchen to find Naruto rummaging in his fridge, now equipped with a small carton of eggs on the middle shelf and a few vegetables and deli meat in the crisper, Sasuke cleared his throat. On a different frequency, Naruto chirped, “Do you think you could show me pancakes today?”

Pancakes? Sasuke swallowed thickly, once again finding it easier to speak if he found something else to look at. “I don’t have time,” he responded. “And you don’t have flour.”

It was silent for a moment. When Naruto spoke, his voice was strangely high. “Right. Well then, something quick.”

“I have to go,” Sasuke insisted, a little louder.

“But you have to cook me breakfast,” Naruto retorted.

He could feel his eye twitch. “I cooked you breakfast yesterday.”

“And then you slept over again.”

And then he slept over again.

He made omelets with the deli meat and scallions.

_o-O-o_

Two weeks went by, though for Sasuke it had been longer. There was some new guilt within him that made it difficult to both leave and stay at the same time. It felt impossible to get his legs to work, so he tried his eye; the Rinnegan had the ability to traverse through space. Curious, Sasuke had been wanting to see how far he could stretch that ability for a long time. Kaguya had shown him her portals, and with his combination of Sharingan and Rinnegan, he

found that he was able to mimic a portion of her technique and turn it into something of his own. It took tremendous chakra, but the intricacy and difficulty of it was exactly what Sasuke needed to pull his focus.

He didn't leave the country, but he did leave the dimension. Leaving and staying at the same time. Whatever. Regularly visiting Konoha wasn't a habit he should have fed into in the first place, and he never promised anyone he would make these visits on a schedule, anyway.

The insomnia had never been worse, though, and for the first time, Sasuke was starting to feel it affect him the way that experts said it should. In the past, Sasuke had been used to getting such terrible sleep that he was able to find a way to still perform his best despite the fatigue. It was his normal energy level. Now that he knew what a true sleep was, though, his body had forgotten those cheat codes it had once relied on. It was as if his body was begging him to shackle it inside Konoha. He cursed himself for letting it become such a routine; he couldn't afford this kind of weakness. He would not trap himself back in that village.

Sasuke threw himself headfirst into mapping out the dimensions his Rinnegan provided him. He decided to start with the one blanketed in snow, as it seemed to be the easiest for him to manage. The bitter cold was a perfect match for his fire nature. He could lose track of time in it because he was completely alone. The realm's time passage was a little wonky. To him, it felt like a month had passed, but when he returned he discovered it was only two weeks. Even without his insomnia, the nights there were almost nonexistent, as the sun stayed in the sky for the vast majority of the day, so he couldn't be completely positive how much time he actually lost. He would have to make another visit and pay more attention to the days.

Having been in a separate realm, Sasuke knew his first order of business would be to return to Kakashi, as there would have been no way for the Hokage to reach him while he had been there. As he reported back his findings, his old teacher raised an eyebrow. "Well, that is certainly interesting," he mused, piquing Sasuke's interest with his tone. "I mean, you seem to have spent a month in there, you say?"

Sighing, Sasuke crossed his arms, "I'm not sure if it was my own delusion, but I'll bring a watch next time to time it out better."

"Oh, yes, right," Kakashi waved him on. "I meant I thought it was strange that you had willingly missed your own birthday." His own-?

Fuck.

Somehow, with all of this new territory to think about, Sasuke had completely forgotten that the absolutely *moronic* plan. That damn fake ceremony. When he had brainstormed the plan, he had always assumed he would have just ditched them on that day. They would have come up with their own conclusions as to why, and he would have been fine with that. But now, "…What day is it?"

Kakashi gave him that smile. "The 22nd."

Fuck. It had taken Sasuke a few days to travel back to the village. He hadn't realized.

Kakashi pondered for a moment, “It’s quite lucky you made it back in time.”

Yeah. Lucky. He stewed for about an hour under some trees at the outer edges of the village. If he had just waited another two days, he would have been able to play it off. No, then they would have still held that fake ceremony, assuring him that the date itself didn’t matter or some other stupid crap. He should have played it the other way, saying that he thought only two weeks had passed in that realm and returned two months later. Now that Kakashi knew he was here, there would be no getting out of it. Spiteful, he considered fucking it all and ditching the village tonight, regardless, but with a sigh he concluded that the fragile strand of thread that was Kakashi’s trust would probably not hold through that.

Besides which, he hadn’t come all this way to *not* sleep on that bed tonight. So he found his way to Naruto’s window, pulling it open to reveal that, while the lights were on, Naruto wasn’t in his bedroom. He hadn’t planned on coming inside the room, as it had become custom to leave immediately for the training fields upon his arrival. Sitting down on the frame of the window, he wondered how long it would take for Naruto to realize his apartment was just broken into. He was notoriously oblivious.

Not long. He seemed to have heard the squeak of the panes of glass and had to take a moment to piece it together. Judging by the blank look on his face when he popped his head around the wall, ramen cup in hand, he was genuinely surprised to see Sasuke there.

But not in the usual way. The differences were glaring. Usually, Naruto would gape and point, shout Sasuke’s name in a comically boisterous way, then he would instantly be blathering on about one thing or another. Sasuke had never realized how grateful he was that Naruto had always presented him with an abnormal greeting, one that didn’t require the pointless formalities of hellos. Dropping in on Naruto uninvited was never anything grand, never constraining in the way someone else would make it. Now, however, with that almost empty expression- like a small woodland creature in a corner- Sasuke started to reconsider coming over.

It was weird. Desperate to bring Naruto back to normal, Sasuke tossed a shuriken at his head.

It worked. Naruto dodged it, bending backwards as the sharp weapon flew just over his face, the thunk of it piercing the wall behind him making him snap back into his usual self. “Oi! What was that for, you bastard?!” Sasuke smirked, glad that Naruto was displaying his grand gestures again for a moment, pointing at the wall. “You just put a hole in my wall!”

Shrugging, Sasuke said dismissively, “You should have caught it.”

“You shouldn’t have thrown it!”

Working Naruto up into this state was always rewarding to watch. A chuckle left him as he hoisted himself out of the window. “Come on, loser.”

He didn’t run with him to their field like he usually did, instead choosing to use his eye to get him there, waiting for him to follow. It took him a couple of minutes. When Naruto arrived at their area, he was already sending Sasuke a scorching glare. “You jerk. What if I didn’t want to come? You would have waited out here forever.”

“Then you wouldn’t have come,” Sasuke stated.

“I wouldn’t have,” Naruto admitted, his eyes somehow narrowing further, “but I kind of want to kick your ass.”

Not that Naruto revving to fight was out of the ordinary in any circumstance, but the subtle difference of this time was not lost on Sasuke. They did, in fact, know each other better than anyone. “Then make your first move.”

He hadn’t spoken soon enough, that was made clear. It was also evident by the fact that a Shadow Clone came out at him from behind a tree at Sasuke’s back that their usual rules didn’t apply for this match. That was fine on his end, though, he thought as his Mangekyou activated. He dealt with the first two clones easily, but then more popped up and Sasuke took a moment to plot out where exactly to toss his twine to tangle in as many as possible, sending electric waves of Chidori through the strands.

There was something about fighting all of Naruto’s clones that was captivating. By now, the ebb and flow of this particular form of battle was second nature. They had been fighting like this for years. Sasuke was smug about how good he was at fighting large numbers singlehandedly; his eyes never missed anything, and there was nothing better than demonstrating the extent of his power in this way. It forced him to be sufficient with his attacks, finding ways to take as many out with one hit as possible. Fighting like this was a logic puzzle. The sounds of the clones popping into smoke was always satisfying.

He didn’t let the enjoyment of this type of battle distract him, though, and always kept a lookout for the original. He must have vanished in the crowd. Or perhaps he hadn’t even been here to begin with. Maybe he sent the clones from the get-go, not quite able to choose between going and staying. Sasuke knew that dilemma well by now. But he also knew that Naruto had to be here, if by the way the statement about kicking Sasuke’s ass was true; it certainly had to be, even if it was a clone that said it. Naruto knew he wouldn’t be able to do any substantial damage to him without being here in person. Which would mean…

Not that it was difficult to know where the flow of chakra was coming from, with his eyes. He found the distant tree the original was hiding behind soon enough, making use of Naruto’s underestimation and finding a way to get some twine around him, binding him to the trunk. Shuriken at the ready, Sasuke wondered how Naruto would get himself out of this situation in time as he let them fly. The solution came to him just a split second before it happened; Sasuke had forgotten that Naruto mastered the Rasengan without the need of clones. The tree Naruto was banded to splintered and exploded, raining down shards of wood over them. The twine was loose without the tree’s circumference.

Freed, Naruto took a moment to assess the battle, and Sasuke didn’t want to let him, but he admitted to himself that he needed it as well. “You’re being too noisy,” he goaded, aiming for a minute to distract him from thinking. “You’re going to wake everyone up.”

“*You* used Chidori,” Naruto glowered.

“Next time I’ll just let your clones clobber me, then,” Sasuke droned sarcastically.

At this, the corners of Naruto's lips quirked. "That'd be a nice change, for once," and he threw a kunai in Sasuke's direction. He had been waiting for this. Naruto was definitely trying to use it as his own distraction for something, but instead Sasuke had decided that it was time to bring his Rinnegan into the action.

The weapon disappeared centimeters away from his face. Smug to see the surprise on Naruto's expression, Sasuke chose the perfect blind spot to make the other end of the portal reappear. The knife zoomed out from behind Naruto and lodged into the back of his arm, piercing him smoothly. Most people would not be so excited to have sharp metal sticking out from their flesh, but Naruto, being Naruto, was not most people. "Whoooaaaa!" He exclaimed, and Sasuke could barely contain his own smirk, having finally managed to break the odd resolve plaguing his opponent. "That was so cool!"

"Dumbass," Sasuke said, though the fondness in his voice couldn't be helped. "Don't compliment your opponent's fighting midbattle."

Something hard hit the side of Sasuke's head. Shit. He took the punch from the clone he hadn't seen. "Consider it part of my tactic," the clone taunted as another locked him up from behind, one arm securing Sasuke's and the other around his neck.

Interesting. Even the clones had that smell. He banished the thought, sending the waves of his Chidori through the chakra points on his skin. The clone vanished into smoke almost as quickly as it had caught him. With the end of his blade, the other one followed suit, the action itself subconscious. Sasuke was more concerned with the original, which he had managed to keep his eye on.

A blue ball of chakra was on its way to him. Sasuke knew better than to face it head-on; that was how he had lost his arm, though this one was nowhere near the power level that one had been. There was no wind chakra mixed with it, and it was the same size as the one from when they were kids on that rooftop. That water tower floated in the forefront of his mind; how dumb he had been getting so worked up over the exploded metal. As if the level Naruto had been back then was anything to sneeze at in comparison to who Sasuke knew now.

With Sasuke's speed, it wasn't hard to deflect the fist, though having to do it with his right hand was a bit of a pain. It was dangerous to reach over at the wrist, pulling the ball of energy directly across his own face until it flew past his shoulder. All Sasuke had to do was lift his knee into place and let Naruto's momentum crash into it.

But Naruto had another hand to deal damage with, one that Sasuke couldn't block as it crashed into his jaw. That punch certainly had more feeling in it than the ones of weeks prior. And if Naruto wasn't going to hold back his weight, then neither was Sasuke. It was taijutsu, then, the pair of them now in close combat. There weren't any more clones. Sasuke kept an eye out for Naruto to make the hand signs to produce more, but he never did. It felt more personal, without them. Repeatedly, Sasuke managed to land his hits, blocking all of the ones coming at him. The Mangekyou was incredibly useful. He could tell that Naruto was getting more and more frustrated as Sasuke's Sharingan gave him the upper hand, and anticipated that he wouldn't have such an advantage for long.

Sure enough, the fox's chakra seeped out, encasing his body in its color. They were almost even, with this, blocking and parrying and blocking again, no hits afterwards quite landing, but Sasuke knew it wouldn't last. Naruto had endless chakra to spare, and he hadn't even activated Sage Mode yet. Frustration overcame him, as well, wondering if he should just damn the entire sleeping village's rest and bring out his Susanoo.

Just as he had made the decision, Naruto threw him for another loop, throwing a punch that zoomed past his ear, except it wasn't a punch at all. It was a grab, and then he was pulling Sasuke forward and they were kissing again, just like that.

It was as if the mental battle within himself trying to forget what Naruto's lips felt like dissolved along with the physical battle between them. They were softer than he remembered, again, even with his superior memory. Sasuke could feel his entire body become encased in the fiery chakra, the Kyuubi's power flowing out from Naruto and completely immersing him, healing the bruises he had acquired moments before; he wasn't sure if Naruto was aware of doing it or not. Both of them were breathing heavily from the exertion of the fight, but it didn't deter them from plunging the kiss deeper, tongues and teeth at each other as though the match was still going on. With the chakra replenishing his stamina, Sasuke felt like he could do this for hours. He dug his fingernails into Naruto's hip, pulling him inward in the same way Naruto's grip at his head was.

They pushed apart at the same time. For a long moment they stared at each other, Naruto's eyes wide as the red chakra dispersed around him, depleting from Sasuke as it went. Even in the dark of the night, his lips were the color of cherries from the kiss. As were his cheeks. It looked almost as if the red chakra *hadn't* all disappeared. Naruto casted his eyes away, pulling himself out of their embrace. "Sorry," he mumbled, dejected. "I- um," he continued as he picked a spot on his chin. "I didn't mean to do that."

What was Sasuke supposed to say to that? He raised a shoulder, nonchalant. Groaning in frustration, Naruto fell dramatically onto his back as if there was something softer than the earth and rock beneath him. The fall didn't seem to hurt him at all. Instead, he lay staring up at the night sky, completely unbothered from having body-slammed himself to the ground in favor of pondering the introspective stars. Raising an eyebrow, Sasuke asked, "What are you doing?"

"I don't know if I'm mad at you or not," he explained.

Sasuke hummed in response.

"You missed last week!" He continued.

Here it was. That awful feeling had overcome him again, and it was all he could do but bury it in anger. "I never promised that these were once-a-week visits."

"I know," the small voice shocked Sasuke out of his irritation. "It's just that- I mean. Every Friday night I began to wait for you. And when you didn't come last week- I guess I just expected you to be there." Sasuke clenched his jaw. Had it developed into such a regular thing that Sasuke was coming on the exact same day every week? He hadn't noticed that. Naruto wasn't finished. "I understand why, except maybe I don't. Last time was kind of

weird.” Bombarded with the memories, heat started to fill Sasuke’s cheeks. Naruto didn’t seem so embarrassed to say it. “But I don’t know. I still waited for you last week. And then the sun came up. And then this week, I didn’t expect you to come at all, and now here you are." He sat up slightly, propping his upper body up by his elbows. “You know, I kind of expected to not see you for a month.”

Sasuke had hid in the other realm for a month. If it weren’t for the time difference… He did not say this out loud.

Instead, he scoffed. “Dumbass.” Contradictory to his statement, Sasuke knelt down on the ground at Naruto’s head, then folded his legs in front of him. Naruto had to look at him upside down, his expression mild, but still confused. With a light hand, Sasuke ran his fingertips through the blond hair in front of him and watched the blue eyes bulge. After a moment, Naruto fell into the touch, letting his head rest against Sasuke’s cross-legged lap.

They were silent for several minutes like that, Sasuke running his hand through the strands of Naruto’s hair. He had no idea what he was doing. It was that damn guilt getting to him. There seemed to be no limit to the amount of worry Sasuke was going to cause him in their lifetime, as if the last five years weren’t enough. It would have been so much easier if Naruto had given up on him like everyone else had- like Sasuke had *wanted* him to back then. Maybe even a part of him wished now. But this kid was stubborn and resilient with everything that was ever handed to him. He fought blood, sweat, and tears for what he believed in. And he, foolishly, still believed in Sasuke, despite how little Sasuke could see in himself that could be worth it to him.

A finger poked at Sasuke’s cheek, directly under his left eye, shocking him out of his spiraling thoughts. “So that Rinnegan is pretty damn cool,” Naruto diverted, his voice not quite back to its usual chirp, though it was bright and comforting.

Sasuke was starting to come to terms with the fact that Naruto was definitely smarter than everyone gave him credit for, at least when it came to understanding other people. He smirked, grasping the excuse for a topic change at once. “Cooler than your dumb frog powers at least.”

“Hey!” Naruto shouted now, fire back in his demeanor as he sat up to turn more menacingly at him. “My frogs are not dumb! They’re way cooler than your snakes!”

Rolling his eyes, Sasuke corrected, “I use hawks, now.”

“Like hawks are any better!”

“They have good eyes. So do I. It’s an aesthetic thing,” he defended. “And flying is *cool*,” he added, teasing Naruto by copying the childish vocabulary.

But Naruto was so earnest about it that it went right over his head. “At least my frogs give me Sage Mode!” Naruto countered, his finger pointing too closely at Sasuke’s face. His upper body was off of the ground, twisted so that he didn’t have to look upside-down to see him. “You can’t tell me Sage Mode isn’t cool!”

It was a lie, but Sasuke goaded anyway, wanting to tease him just a little more by denying him. “Not really.”

He wasn’t quite in his lap anymore, but Naruto laying in such a way right in front of him was messing with Sasuke’s head, despite (or maybe it wasn’t entirely unrelated) his vow, “Just you wait! I’m gunna learn something that will for sure make you gravel at my feet to never use it against you! It’s gunna be so cool that your jaw will drop when you see it!” Sasuke didn’t doubt it for a second. After all, Naruto never went back on his word. Perhaps Sasuke would have to put some training in to learn something new of his own to preemptively combat it. He hoped Naruto wouldn’t put any observation into the way Sasuke couldn’t quite suppress a smile. Humming without any commitment, Sasuke turned his face to the night sky. It got the reaction he knew it would, with Naruto continuing to shout those superfluous threats.

Continuing to pretend to ignore him, Sasuke focused on the few constellations he knew the names of, feeling weirdly content. A quiet village behind him juxtaposed with the loud boy in front of him. He didn’t like the village, but the boy… Eventually, Naruto became frustrated with being ignored, and grabbed the front of his shirt, yelling something loud. It was here that Sasuke finally looked him back in the eye, and-

Was forced to face the reality that he very much did want to kiss Naruto again. The offended yelling stopped under the eye contact, Naruto’s spiteful words withering away on his tongue as a colorful tint overcame his cheeks. Judging by this reaction, Naruto also was thinking the same thing. But he stopped himself for some reason, dropping Sasuke and pouting at the ground, mumbling a sulky, “Bastard,” as he did. Perhaps he was able to see that Sasuke was intentionally pushing every button he knew to get under his skin.

And now they were so close, and Naruto was blushing. Sasuke was the reason they had been so close. Even before having roused Naruto into grabbing his cloak in ire; he was the one who had put Naruto’s head in his lap. Why had he done that?

It was as if he could feel Naruto’s pain, now. They had always been able to feel each other’s emotions so well to begin with. He supposed that while it wasn’t a new concept, as of recently it had become something else entirely. Consciously, Sasuke could tell that Naruto felt lonely, and subconsciously he knew that Naruto would respond best to physical affection, having been depleted of it for his entire childhood. It was different for Sasuke, who had such forms of precious intimacy in his youth ripped from him in his crucial years of development. It was an act that he remembered Itachi doing to him when they were little, placing Sasuke’s head in his lap and running his fingers through his hair. Though the thought of someone other than his brother doing it to him made him wildly uncomfortable, thanks to the way it had been so traumatically taken away from him, doing it in turn to Naruto had been strangely second nature. If he did it again, Sasuke knew that it would be too easy to tap into that connection they shared, and he would probably be able to read exactly what Naruto wanted.

He didn’t let himself. “Let’s go back,” he insisted.

“Huh? Oh,” Naruto stuttered, looking up toward the sky again. “It’s a nice night, though.”

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Sasuke urged, “Let’s go. I’m hungry.”

Naruto was quiet for a moment, and when Sasuke focused back on him it was to see a sheepish expression. “I mean, I’ve only got ramen in the house right now.” Sasuke could throttle him. At Sasuke’s demeanor, Naruto quickly explained, “I didn’t think you would be coming over for another two weeks!”

“You shouldn’t be eating that stuff for every meal when I’m not around!”

As Sasuke fell asleep that night pressed into the clouds of comfort, he longed for the morning when Naruto’s weight would be against him; the absence of consciousness always brought them closer.

_o-O-o_

The next morning proved just as blissful as his fantasies the night before. This time when he woke up, he was on his side facing the wall with the entirety of their bodies pressed into each other, Naruto’s front to Sasuke’s back. An arm was draped over his middle, the hand coming up to rest as it always did lazily on his chest. A soft puff of breath hit the back of his neck rhythmically, in time with the little snuffling snores. Sasuke closed his eyes again and teetered on the edge of sleep for quite some time.

It might have been an hour later that Naruto finally stirred, his body stiffening- not in shock, like Sasuke feared for a quick moment, but his muscles stretching slowly before they released, then holding Sasuke closer. The nose at his neck nuzzled inward, grazing over that spot under his ear that he learned the last time he had slept in this bed had brought him such pleasure. That spot that he tried to not think about for the entire month he was in the other dimension. He could tell that Naruto was awake, perhaps teetering that edge of sleep just like he was. Sasuke’s toes curled as the skin of Naruto’s nose and lips brushed the sensitive area. “Naruto,” he breathed out, because he didn’t think the other boy was aware that Sasuke was awake.

Naruto stiffened again, and this time it was definitely in shock. Frowning to himself, hoping that the idiot didn’t think that was a call for him to stop what he was doing, Sasuke pressed himself back more into the other body as if it were possible for them to be physically closer than they already were. They were close enough that Sasuke could feel the thumping of a heart against his back. Sasuke stretched out that column of his throat just slightly more. Thankfully, Naruto caught on, that thumping evening out again, though not quite as slowly as it had been just prior. The air coming out of Naruto’s lips was hot and humid against Sasuke’s skin, millimeters away from igniting him in that strange pleasure he had been secretly longing for again. And then they made the lightest of contact, barely even there, hardly distinguishable from the burning breath-

Naruto’s stomach growled loudly in the silent room.

“U-Um…” Naruto stuttered, and Sasuke was met with the absurd desire to laugh. Maybe they would have ignored it, had it just been one growl, but another one came soon after and Sasuke knew they couldn’t.

He allowed his body to finally stretch, their tangled limbs knocking into one another as he did. It wasn’t exactly possible to roll over, with Naruto pressed at his back the way he was,

but Sasuke craned his neck to tell him, “I’ll get started on breakfast, then.”

There was a blush across Naruto’s cheeks as he smiled sheepishly, “We’ll have to go to the market for some stuff.” Naruto’s eyes were shut with the grin, but somehow Sasuke knew that if they were open, they’d be staring at his lips. Probably because Sasuke was having a hard time ignoring Naruto’s in turn.

He swung himself out of the bed with more difficulty than he had cared to admit. “I’ll go,” he said, crossing the room to retrieve his day clothes. “I’ll be quick.”

He was. He returned with some baking supplies; he had promised last time about pancakes. As they ate, Naruto chirped on about the Third Hokage’s grandson getting sent on a B-Rank. This led to him complaining once again about not being sent on missions. Sasuke chuckled to himself; Naruto was never one who liked having nothing to do. The lessons Kakashi was making him take with Iruka were dull, according to him. “It’s all books and written tests, and it makes me want to smack my brains out,” he complained.

Naruto begged him to give him stories about the missions he had been on, as if dying to live vicariously through him. Sighing, Sasuke shook his head, “There’s really not much to tell.”

“Come on, you’ve been travelling the world!” Naruto exclaimed, his hand flailing with emphasis. “That’s gotta be loads more exciting than being cooped up here.”

Sasuke knew it. He thought, for a moment, that Kakashi wouldn’t want him giving details of what he was doing to the restless ninja, given that he was trying to keep him locked up in a classroom. This more than anything made Sasuke say, “I’ve actually been travelling to different dimensions.”

He watched the blank look overcome the other boy for a moment before a finger jutted blatantly at Sasuke’s left eye. “OH! NO WAY! YOU CAN DO THAT?!” He was not able to suppress the smirk on his lips after that. “Hang on-” the cogs in Naruto’s brain grind forward. “Wait. What are you doing there?”

He shrugged, “Mapping it out.”

Naruto blinked at him again, and with a jolt he understood what Naruto was going to demand of him just moments before the idiot got there himself. “You can take me with you!”

That wasn’t what Sasuke intended the conversation to land on. He just wanted to rile him up enough to give Kakashi a headache or two. “No,” he denied without having to put any thought into it.

“Come on! What would you do if you actually ran into Kaguya?” Naruto insisted, the amount of passion in him making him stand, slamming his hands on the table. “You can’t fight her on your own!”

He found himself raising his voice, “We sealed her away. There isn’t any chance she’s escaped from the Six Path’s seal. At worst, she might have a few lackeys in there. Probably some white Zetsu, if anyone. Are you insinuating I can’t handle myself against them?”

“Of course you can handle yourself,” Naruto backtracked before continuing, “but the two of us together would be safer than you going alone. And isn’t the reason I can’t be sent on missions because it would be seen as us trying to start a war again? No one in that dimension knows who I am! Are there even people over there? It’s perfect!”

Despite himself, Sasuke pursed his lips at the thought. He quickly shook it away. “If something happens to me over there then you would have no way of getting back into this realm.”

“So?” Naruto whined flippantly.

Actual anger bubbled in him. “*So* you wouldn’t be able to return to this damn village to become Hokage.” *And then this awful world would stay exactly the way it already is*, he didn’t add.

Infuriatingly, Naruto pressed on, “Every mission that we go on as ninja has the same risks of not returning. Knowing that I’m gunna become Hokage someday only makes me fight harder to return home.”

“But if I become incapacitated in some way-”

“You think I’m just gunna sit around and watch you become incapacitated?” Sasuke blinked him. He had that fire in him, matching the anger Sasuke felt with determination. “And since when did you become someone who worries about losing a fight?”

Naruto had made a point, Sasuke was forced to realize. When *had* Sasuke become someone who thought so little of his own capabilities he let it determine the outcome before it happened? He couldn’t remember the last time he had done that. Sasuke knew his own powers. He knew that both he and Naruto were the best at what they did- the war had proved that to everyone, but he had known it since before that. So why did the thought of Naruto coming with him to the other dimensions fill his stomach with so much dread? There was an infinite number of things that could go wrong in those other dimensions, but hadn’t Naruto shown that he was a lot more capable than everyone always assumed of him? And had Sasuke ever let himself downplay his own skills enough to make him *worry*?

Sasuke had an abundance of confidence in his own abilities; after all, hadn’t he managed to succeed in all of his goals? Well, of course, except the one. But that was because there was only one person Sasuke knew who could beat him, and he was standing at the other side of the table emanating fire.

A knock came to the door, both of them freezing in their spots, eyes wide at each other.

Eventually, another knock came, but still neither of them moved. All memory of what they had previously been talking about vanished, and Sasuke could hear the questions that echoed in his own mind also running through Naruto’s head- who was going to walk in on their breakfast? Was Sasuke going to stay, or would he flee out of the window before they saw him? Was Sasuke still insistent on keeping his visits a secret? …And would whoever-it-was somehow be able to tell the position the pair of them had been in not an hour earlier?

Ridiculous. Of course not. Sasuke weighed the facts. He was wearing his day clothes. Naruto would look suspicious with a table set for two, cooking *pancakes* for himself; it was suspicious enough already for Naruto to be eating anything other than cup ramen in his own home. But it wasn't like it was the crack of dawn. He thought of the pajamas he had placed in Naruto's hamper, not on the floor. But teleporting would leave a large noticeable trail of chakra…

The third knock couldn't be ignored. "C-Coming!" Naruto stuttered, stumbling toward the door.

Sakura. Sasuke felt rooted at the table. Just behind her, Sasuke could see the tuft of white hair that belonged to his old teacher; it was a good thing Sasuke hadn't fled, because Kakashi would have definitely known. "Good morning, Naruto! We were just-" Sakura froze as well, spotting Sasuke at the table just past the corner of the wall. "Sasuke-kun," she muttered in disbelief. Cursing at himself, Sasuke debated if it was too late to disappear.

When Naruto turned around it was like he, too, was in shock that Sasuke was still there. Seeing this, Sasuke averted his eyes in the other direction, forcing out a, "Good morning."

"Ahh, Sasuke!" Kakashi called, craning his head around the walls at him. "What a surprise!" He said in a way that indicated to Sasuke that he was actually very unsurprised, damn him. This was dangerous, if Kakashi wasn't surprised.

So Kakashi knew he'd find him here. He floundered for damage control. "I just got in," he insisted loudly to the group, making sure to not see whatever dumb look came on Naruto's face from it.

As if masking her shock, Sakura came inside, toeing her shoes off at the door. "Happy birthday, Sasuke-kun!" she bid him. It was like another blow to his psyche. It was his birthday. That damn ceremony. He hummed his thanks, unable to voice anything more coherent. "Did you guys make breakfast?"

"Uh- Sasuke did! He's actually a really good cook, if you can believe it!" Naruto laughed.

"Really?" Sakura said in disbelief, staring at Naruto with reverence. Trying to keep the blood out of his face, Sasuke frowned at how surprised she seemed about it. Sasuke had been living by himself for a decade. Why was it such a shock for everyone to know he could feed himself?

"Wait! Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto suddenly exclaimed, and Sasuke's stomach filled with dread again at what he knew Naruto was going to berate their teacher for. Sure enough, Naruto demanded, "Why didn't you tell me Sasuke was visiting the other dimensions on his missions?!"

A little ball of hope teased him from out of nowhere. Surely, Kakashi would shut down that idiotic idea Naruto was so hellbent on. "Wha- Naruto, I only just found out about it yesterday."

"Sasuke's going to other dimensions?" Sakura knitted her eyebrows.

“Yeah!” Naruto shouted his energy at her. “To dimensions where people don’t know who either of us are! There might not even *be* people in those other dimensions! Kakashi-sensei!” he turned again to his teacher. “Why don’t you send me with him?! You won’t have to worry about anyone over there thinking it’s an act of war to send me! So I can go on an actual mission!”

Kakashi’s eyes widened and then narrowed, “What makes you think that’s the reason I don’t send you on missions…?” As his sentence trailed, Kakashi answered his own question with a glare flickering to where Sasuke sat at the table, leaning back noncommittally. Sasuke couldn’t care less about the waves of masked anger coming for him. It was the truth. Naruto at least deserved to know *why* his pleas were being ignored. It was cruel to hide it.

“That doesn’t matter!” Naruto trudged on, his endless energy raging. “If some part of Kaguya is still hanging around over there, it would take both Sasuke *and* me to put a stop to her!”

Frothy anger started to rise in him again, and he could feel his upper lip twitch in his attempt to keep it at bay. “Give it a rest, Naruto; I told you there isn’t any danger like that in there. We already sealed her *and* Zetsu.”

A pink lip jutted out at him, indignation evident in the way he folded his arms. “Who knows what kind of danger could be in those dimensions? Something like that shouldn’t be a one-man-mission. It’d be safer if we went together! Right, Kakashi-sensei?!”

Yes, Kakashi, join the conversation and tell this idiot how stupid he’s being, Sasuke thought bitterly. He turned to his old teacher, only to blanch at his expression. Was Kakashi thinking about it? He had his finger against his chin, head cocked to the side, giving the faintest of hums. “That’s something to think about,” he muttered, as though to himself.

Panicking, Sasuke stood up quickly. “Naruto’s supposed to be focusing on studying!”

Kakashi waved the finger away from his face, his thoughtful expression staying with him, “Yes, that is true.”

Whining, Naruto dropped his shoulders, “I’ve been studying for *months*!”

“He has been working very hard,” Kakashi mused.

“That doesn’t mean he’s done!”

“His grades *are* quite poor…” Kakashi agreed to himself.

Frustration finally hitting its point, Naruto raised his fist at Sasuke, “What’s your problem?! Why don’t you want to go on a mission with me?!”

“I told you: it’s dangerous!”

“*All* missions are dangerous! We signed up for that when we became ninja!” Heat flared in Sasuke’s chest at this; they became ninja when they were children. “What’s more dangerous is taking on a mission all by yourself! There’s strength and safety in numbers! If something happens to you over there, none of us would ever know!”

The fingers of Sasuke's hand were going white with how hard he clenched them. Naruto's words weren't quite true. With the link between them that was the Sage of Six Path's chakra, they could feel each other even across dimensions. Naruto, at least, would know if something happened to him. But that hadn't been what Naruto meant. "It doesn't matter how many people are with me. If something happened to me while we were over there, *no one* would be able to return. The more people I bring with me, the worse it would be."

"Not necessarily," Sasuke almost exploded when Kakashi interrupted, pissed to see him with that analytic look, as if trying to encrypt every molecule of him. "Someone would still be able to take your eye from your corpse." *No fucking shit*, Sasuke thought to himself, glaring at him with the borrowed eyes of his dead brother. Of course that was Kakashi's resolution to the hypothetical situation, having been renowned for his own borrowed Sharingan for over a decade. Clenching his jaw, Sasuke became more resolute on his final goal than ever.

When Sasuke died, he was going to do so in a way that completely destroyed his eyes. This power belonged to no one but an Uchiha. If the years with Orochimaru had not solidified that for him, seeing Danzo's arm absolutely did. He knew if he were to die his eyes would be used for nothing good- that old creep definitely already had plans set, and not to mention the countless other ninja scrambling for some semblance of power they could never achieve on their own. With the injustices done to his clan, no one on this awful planet deserved them. It was their choice to commit genocide, or sit back while it happened, or benefit from the corrupt system that had oppressed his clan in the first place. They won't get to utilize the Uchiha's power after doing so much to destroy its people. Even if doing so meant stranding the only person he cared about in a different dimension, he *will* destroy his brother's eyes before he dies. Especially this Rinnegan.

He was so besotted in his rage that he physically startled when Sakura berated their teacher. "Don't say that, Kakashi-sensei!" she said sternly. "That would be an awful thing to do! I get that *your* Sharingan had been gifted to you, but Sasuke's eyes are inherited from his clan. They are the last natural ones left in the world. How do you think the thought of his own teammates stealing them from him after he dies would make him feel?"

Sasuke blinked at her, his anger melting into something quite strange. She was so riled up on his behalf. He had certainly not expected anyone left alive would be able to understand that particular bit of grudge he held. Especially from Sakura, whom he had long deemed ignorant back when she gave him that stupid speech about orphans all those years ago.

"Well, regardless," Kakashi continued, waving aside Sakura's scolding in a way that made Sasuke's eyebrow twitch in irritation. "Sasuke would be less likely to find himself in such a situation if he had a team with him."

"I have my own team I can take with me," Sasuke injected loudly, determinedly not reacting to the way Naruto cried out his name in anguish as he did.

"No doubt, you do," Kakashi smiled at him. "But as they are not Konoha ninja, they would not be reporting back to me if something does happen to you, would they?"

Sasuke surveyed Kakashi evenly. Kakashi did the same. It didn't stop Sasuke from stating firmly, "This isn't a matter of Konoha. The whole world would benefit from understanding

those realms. Who I take with me is my own choice."

Kakashi hummed, "And your friends would continue the fight after you died?"

"Kakashi-sensei!" Sakura reprimanded again. It took all of Sasuke's willpower to stay calmly in his seat, if only because there was some truth behind his words. Jugo would still follow Sasuke's orders after his death, though he would probably not succeed on his own. Karin might help, if she wasn't rendered useless from grief. Suigetsu definitely wouldn't, not unless Sasuke found a way to keep him invested in the goal. But knowing him, he'd tag along with the other two if only to annoy Karin. Whatever. He could find a way, if the fight was worth it.

Shrugging exaggeratedly, Kakashi sighed, "If you're looking for someone who would be dedicated to protecting the entire world, I would think Naruto would be your first option." Damn him. Scoffing, Sasuke clenched his teeth together, doing his best to not grind them in his anger.

"Then it's settled!" Naruto exclaimed, giddiness overwhelming the tension in the room. "I get to go with Sasuke on his other-dimension scouting missions!"

"I already told you that you're not!" Sasuke reminded him angrily. "This isn't a mission, dumbass- it's just something I'm doing in my free time. You need to focus on your studying."

Just as Naruto whined, Kakashi added the worst bit of information he could have, "I don't see how he can't do both, seeing as how slowly time moves over in that dimension. He would have plenty of time to still devote to learning." Well, there was that bit of information out there, now. He hoped Naruto would not be so adept to apply that information to the length of Sasuke's absence.

He berated himself; why did he care? This conversation was a headache. Bringing someone into those other dimensions was a choice that only Sasuke could make, after all. Even if Kakashi wanted to throw his weight around as Hokage and order him, Sasuke was under no real obligations to listen. Sure, he wanted to prove himself as trustworthy, which was why he was taking other missions, but was he *loyal* to the state that murdered his clan? Definitely not. Kakashi already knew this. It was abundantly clear. Perhaps Kakashi needed to be reminded of that.

Judging by the careful way he was being surveyed, Kakashi wasn't unaware at all, though. When they first started this arrangement, Kakashi tried to enforce weekly updates with in-person meetings once a month. Sasuke did not follow that order. He sent updates when updates happened, and he wasn't going to spend days travelling all the way back to Fire to report back nothing of substance. It was evident that Kakashi was perhaps a little bitter about it, but there was a silent agreement between them to not push it. There was nothing Kakashi could order him to do; only ask. Sasuke would take the missions for his own moralities and nothing more.

"Well, it's Sasuke's choice," Kakashi said airily.

Blanching, Sasuke balled his hand into a fist. What was his angle here? All of that arguing, only for Kakashi to finally admit out loud that he had no control over him? "What!? Kakashi-

sensei! You're the Hokage! Can't you just order him?" Naruto whined.

"No, I don't think I could," Kakashi admitted, and Sasuke could feel the contempt behind the flippant tone. "No one can force Sasuke to do what he doesn't want to. I thought that much was obvious by now. It just boils down to if Sasuke wants to spend time with you or not."

"Don't tell him that!" Sasuke snapped before his logic kicked in. He knew instantly what Kakashi was trying to do; he was trying to guilt Sasuke by manipulating Naruto into thinking he didn't want to see him.

It left a bad taste in his mouth to see someone using Naruto in this way. Naruto was staring blankly at him, Kakashi's words registering. Sasuke scoffed his annoyance. As if Naruto wasn't the only person Sasuke actually *wanted* to spend time with. As if he wasn't already spending time with Naruto on a weekly basis explicitly because he wanted to. He couldn't say this aloud with Sakura in the room.

Kakashi goaded. "Is it not true?" Sasuke could kill him.

It was true that going into those other dimensions was dangerous, but was that really why he didn't want Naruto coming with him? If Sasuke was being truthful, he *liked* travelling alone. Travelling with others was always cumbersome. Everyone always needed to stop to rest at different times which would slow them down, and they would argue about stupid things like where to set up camp. Sasuke learned that he liked being able to move at his own pace. He and Naruto fought on a regular basis, but Sasuke enjoyed their dynamic, and he was certain Naruto did, too. But if he was going to have a companion on any journey, he knew Naruto would be his first pick.

No, Sasuke knew why he didn't want to travel with Naruto, and it had nothing to do with the arguments they would inevitably get into, and more to do with what they would do when they *weren't* arguing. Sasuke was already far too comfortable in that bed.

He sighed as he realized it. He still needed to answer Kakashi's question. "It's too dangerous, right now," Sasuke said evenly. "And it takes too much chakra to get there and back by myself, let alone me taking anyone else. I need to figure out a way to do it safely, just in case we need to get out of there in a hurry." It wasn't untrue, but he preferred to make himself out to be weak rather than have Naruto be manipulated. "And as those dimensions are not an immediate threat, I don't see the point in bothering anyone else with it. There are more things to worry about first."

"Well, that's that, then," Kakashi agreed easily to Sasuke's annoyance.

Naruto slumped dramatically. "I'm never gunna get to do anything fun again," he moaned, head hanging low.

"You should be using this time to train," Sakura reminded, exasperated.

"It gets boring, training by yourself!"

Sasuke let his breath out, glad that the conversation was finally over. His heart was still pounding from the whirlwind of it. “Well, anyway, now that we’re all here!” Sakura chirped, coming over to stand by Sasuke’s side. “What’s the plan for today?”

“Oh, yeah!” Naruto lifted his head, looking expectantly between her and his teacher. “Did you guys need something? You came over awfully early.”

The pair of them became quite suspicious. Sasuke narrowed his eyes at the way they both laughed uncomfortably. “Ah- well, it doesn’t matter much anymore,” Sakura waved. The only explanation for this behavior was that they had been coming over to talk to Naruto about Sasuke, probably something to do with the stupid fake ceremony. Something sappy and gross about being tactful. He scoffed to himself, because it was so plain to see, but it would fly completely over Naruto’s head. But Kakashi knew somehow that Sasuke would be here, and perhaps wanted to see how Sasuke would react to Sakura finding him. Doing her best to hide her nerves behind a smile, Sakura tilted her head, “Kakashi-sensei managed to get the day off for his Hokage duties, so we figured this would be a good day for some team bonding!”

Eye twitching involuntarily, Sasuke was forced to recognize that he would never be able to escape the Team Seven dynamic. It wasn’t really a bad thing, of course, but after all of their history together it was just such a strange thing to have held up through all its trials. They hadn’t been on a mission together for over five years, excluding the war. “We’re not twelve anymore,” he slewed.

“That doesn’t mean you three can’t work on your teamwork. And besides,” Kakashi smiled brightly behind his mask, “it’s fun!” Fun. Bonding with his ‘teammates’. It was such a cookie-cutter idealistic concept, foreign and almost downright bizarre. The era of his life where such a thing was normal felt like a parallel universe now. He was only just starting to get used to having conversations with the other three. He could veto the proposition, but as it was-

“You mean we’re all training together today?!” Naruto sounded as if he was just handed the most precious gem of a gift in his life. Distain dissolved on Sasuke’s tongue at the pure excitement in the expression. He had never looked more like an echo of his childhood self, doing nothing to quell the nostalgia Sasuke was trying to fend off. To make matters worse, his blue eyes met Sasuke’s, his smile piercing through him better than any blade ever could.

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6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Kakashi led them to the exact same training field from the previous night; neither Naruto nor Sasuke dared to look at each other. The evidence of their fight was blinding- that exploded tree looking worse in the sunlight, with the splinters of it strewn across the grass for meters. Less evident was the unmarked spot where the battle ended. Sasuke didn't let himself blush as he noticed.

"So what do you have in store for us, Kakashi-sensei?" Naruto asked excitedly.

Their teacher seemed pleased to have been asked. He pulled his hand out from his pocket, slyly presenting a small silver bell as if he had been waiting for this moment for years. Sasuke had to roll his eyes, scoffing to himself. "The bell exercise?" Sakura blinked in confusion, but she, too, had a smile on her lips.

"But we already know that the secret is to work together!" Naruto mused, even though the small jingle of the bell seemed to reignite something in him. "And besides, we already won it from you." Sasuke supposed the other two probably had redone the exercise without him. None of them were kids anymore; it was probably far too easy for the other two to have stolen them whenever that was, let alone how quick the test would be now.

"I wasn't going to do the exact same exercise, per say," Kakashi smiled. He clenched down on the bell with his fist, which gave a light chime at the movement. "You've all proven that you can get the bells from me. I've got something else in mind. There's only one bell this time, and I'm going to hide it somewhere in the village. It'll be up to you three to find it."

Cocking his head to the side, Naruto raised an eyebrow, "We just have to find a bell? How is this training?"

"It's teamwork; the three of us have to find it together." Sakura explained dutifully.

Kakashi's smile had a darker glint to it. Reading this look, Sasuke corrected, "No, the teamwork isn't necessarily between the three of us. The real test is if we can get into Kakashi's mind to decipher where he would hide it."

The smile grew wider at this. "Ah, yes, but will I be using your expectations of where it would be to misguide you?" He put a finger to his chin theatrically. "Who knows. That's up to you to interpret." Of course, always with the mind games. Sasuke could almost growl at him. "Well, I'll be off to hide it then. You three sit here until I come back."

He waved back at them, taking his time sauntering away. As the rest of them watched him go, Sasuke could feel Naruto getting into the game. "Hey, guys," he whispered, his hand

covering the side of his mouth so the sound wouldn't travel. "What do you say we-"

Purple walls of chakra encased them just as Naruto was about to suggest they attempt to cheat by following their teacher. Typical. A barrier jutsu, placed on four scrolls, cubing them in. It shocked Naruto, though, who let out a wail in anguish. "Oh, and no peeking!" Kakashi reminded, suddenly right outside of the barrier again, because of course he knew what Naruto would try to do. He disappeared then, the act of slowly walking away at his own pace having just been one of his dramatic flourishes.

Naruto banged against the wall, which normally burned to touch, but Naruto didn't seem to mind. "He locked us up!"

"Because you were about to cheat!" Sakura accused bitterly at him.

"Well, he never said that we couldn't!" Naruto argued back. "Would have been his own fault for not laying out rules!" Sasuke scoffed, though in humor. Nothing about Naruto ever truly changed. The noise caught Naruto's attention, and Sasuke could see the proverbial lightbulb go off in his head. "Hey, Sasuke, you can get us out of here with your Rinnegan!"

"So?" He said flatly, because it's not like he wasn't completely aware of that fact.

"*So*," Naruto pushed, "you can get us out of here, and then we can tail him! He'd never know!"

Sasuke eyed him. "I *could* get us out of here," he said carefully, observing the way Naruto grew even more excited, balling his fists and letting out a gleeful cheer. Sakura, on the other hand, seemed quite taken aback. Panicking slightly as Sasuke stepped forward to her, Sakura looked up at him with wide eyes, shellshocked that Sasuke was apparently agreeing to cheat in such an abysmal way. Activating his Rinnegan, he rested a hand on her shoulder and the pair of them fell back into the void of nothingness, reappearing some ten feet away in place of a fallen branch on the opposite side of the purple barriers.

It took Naruto a full twenty seconds after they left to realize what had just happened had not been in his favor at all. "Sas-Sasuke? Sasuke! Hey!" He desperately banged against the walls as if they didn't burn from every hit. "Oi! You left me in here!"

"Dumbass," Sasuke shook his head. He tried not to show how winded using that power made him, especially with two people. As he found a good spot against a nearby tree to sit, Sakura came to, understanding the situation rather slowly for what Sasuke knew would be usual for her. A byproduct of Sasuke touching her shoulder.

Naruto was complaining. "That's not fair! You bastard! Come let me out, too!" It seemed Naruto was oblivious to the fact that he was most definitely powerful enough to break that particular barrier. It was no Red Yang. Sasuke wondered if even just a large Rasengan would shatter it.

"You're the only one who *needs* to be in there!" Sakura reasoned bluntly. "Of course Sasuke and I don't need to be babied to not cheat." Side-eyeing her, Sasuke amended wordlessly that he certainly was not above cheating, because no doubt Kakashi would be using his fair share

of trickery, but to attempt to do so in such a blatant way would be beneath him. He didn't need the handicap for this. Once the game officially started, all resolve would be out of the window. He only escaped because he simply didn't enjoy being caged, especially by Kakashi's doing. And it was worth it to get under Naruto's skin.

Bottom lip jutting out, Naruto crossed his arms. "This is a ninja test! Aren't we *supposed* to use any means necessary to complete our missions?"

"You're so immature," Sakura nagged. While Sasuke agreed that there was no denying that, he also agreed with Naruto's statement. He contemplated seeing how far they would get by tailing their teacher, but no. He wanted the extra challenge, he realized.

So they waited like that for the better half of an hour, Naruto wailing away in his purple chakra cage, Sakura and Sasuke doing their best to ignore him as they rested against nearby trees. Sakura chose one close to him, commenting lightly on the nostalgia. Her words were sweet, and he allowed himself to enjoy the comfort it brought him.

When Kakashi came back for them, he took a moment to evaluate in the situation, deducing what must have happened. Sasuke could pinpoint the moment Kakashi remembered the power of the Rinnegan. He sighed, "I guess that's how it is." He couldn't complain further; Naruto *was* the only one who needed the barrier. "Okay," he said louder, "it's hidden. I've got some work to do, so let me know when you find it."

"Wait- I thought you said you took the day off?" Sakura pouted as she stood up.

Laughing nervously, Kakashi rubbed the back of his head, "I thought I did too. But taking a day off from being Hokage is a lot harder than it seems, I've come to realize. Don't worry- it shouldn't take too long."

"Hang on," Sasuke interrupted, uninterested in Kakashi's work. "What are the parameters of the hiding spot?" he fished, hoping to find some kind of hint in his answer.

For a moment, Kakashi stared at him. Then, slowly, he began to smile, "Maybe you'll find it quicker than I thought." He mused, as though to himself. Then, in contradiction, answered Sasuke's question. "Anywhere."

While the other two blinked at him, Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "Anywhere?" Naruto asked.

"Anywhere," Kakashi reiterated. Shrugging noncommittally, he then added, "Could be on the highest rooftop. Could be underground. I could have thrown it in a garbage can. Honestly, at this point I don't even remember. The only thing you can be certain of is that it's within Konoha's borders. Other than that, good luck!"

With that, he disappeared in a puff of smoke. The walls around Naruto vanished with him, but Naruto remained fixated in his spot. Sasuke was also in no rush to head out, his mind reeling with the possibilities of where the bell could be. Obviously Kakashi would not have thrown it in the garbage; the symbolism of that would not be what Kakashi was going for. He also doubted that it was underground; what would be the meaning of that? And he wouldn't have brought attention to it. No, more likely was that he wanted to hide it in some place that

held meaning to them as a team, which meant he wanted the three of them to brainstorm through some important spots.

Sakura had come to the same conclusion. “Maybe we should start at the training field.”

“We’re already in one,” Naruto furrowed his eyebrows.

“No, you idiot, *the* training field. Our first one,” She emphasized, hands on her hips.

Sasuke doubted it would be there; that was definitely way too easy of a spot. But it seemed appropriate to start there, so he went along with it. It only took them a few minutes before they found themselves back in their first training field as a team. Once they arrived, Naruto began scavenging around the trees and ground, as if he were a dog looking for where it buried its bone. “It could be anywhere,” he repeated to himself as he closely inspected a leaf, like Kakashi had somehow managed to learn how to transfigure objects.

As dense as Naruto was, something in Sasuke knew already that it would probably be Naruto who managed to crack the final code of the hiding spot. While Sakura might have the most logical sense of reading others, Naruto’s natural ability to empathize with other people’s hearts was unparalleled. Sasuke was abysmal at that. He had no desire to relate to other people. But where the others lacked, Sasuke succeeded in understanding how Kakashi’s tricks worked, something that constantly flew over his teammates’ heads. Perhaps the three of them did make a good team after all. Sasuke rolled his eyes at his own thoughts.

After coming to this conclusion, Sasuke turned around and almost jumped at the sight he saw in the distance. The sight excited him so much that he chose to exert chakra teleporting over to it, calling, “Over there,” to the other two just before he went.

Sure enough, at the foot of the middle of the three log posts was a bento box. A million emotions ran through him, from annoyance to exasperation to begrudging fondness. Sighing, he picked it up. It was light, as if there wasn’t any food in it, though there was a small rattling as it moved around. “Someone left their lunch…?” Naruto trailed, oblivious.

“No, you idiot,” Sakura berated him, “Kakashi left us a clue. Look where we are!”

As the significance dawned on him, Naruto’s smile grew wide, and then soft. Watching it, Sasuke ducked his head to hide any evidence of emotion on his own face. “Here,” he said, handing the box out for one of them to open, as it would be less awkward for them to do with their two hands. Sakura opened it for them, pulling out-

“A pencil?” Naruto asked aloud, one eyebrow popped in confusion. The confusion was met by the other two as well. A pencil, as in-? “The school!” Naruto chirped as he grabbed the pencil, dashing away without a care for the fact that he was leaving his team behind.

“N-Naruto-” Sasuke called in shock before following after him, Sakura just seconds behind him. The more Sasuke thought about it, the more he agreed with the conclusion Naruto had come to. Certainly a pencil meant that they had to go search the school. What else could it mean? There was not any other shared history regarding such a mundane object.

It only took them a few minutes running after Naruto until they reached the building. Coming back here felt exceptionally surreal to Sasuke. It looked so different than what he remembered; Sasuke could have sworn the dimensions were off. With a pang, he realized that it was, in fact, different. This entire town had been a crater not too long ago. It was all rebuilt. With the help of genjutsu, it seemed like they did their best to rebuild the village exactly as it was before the attack of that Akatsuki member. But it was impossible for them to do a perfect job.

Whatever. He didn't have too many fond memories of the place, anyway. He learned all of his *real* foundational techniques from Itachi, then conned the rest from Orochimaru. …And of course the Chidori from Kakashi himself.

"What do you think? Our old classroom?" Sakura asked him. He hummed in agreement; Naruto was already running toward it first. There weren't any students around today, as it was a Saturday. They followed him inside, taking the vaguely familiar path to their old classroom.

Then it happened. The pair of them, Sasuke and Sakura, turned the corner of the hallway just in time to see it transpire. Naruto, in his haste to search for the bell, was running too fast to notice. His fingers curled around the door, sliding it open recklessly.

The eraser thonked on his head with a puff of chalk.

Sasuke couldn't see Naruto's expression with anything but his mind's eye. The boy froze in the middle of the doorway, hair now dusted with white. The knowledge that Kakashi had patiently waited *years* for this retaliation, so meticulous and petty, washed over him. Eventually, Naruto let out an anguished scream. It became impossible for Sasuke to hold it in. He laughed.

"Oi!" Naruto shouted angrily, turning around as he grabbed the offending object off of his dusty head. It was too much for Sasuke to handle, Naruto receiving his comeuppance after all of these years. The fact that Kakashi was still bitter enough to want revenge on something so stupid. He laughed, and then he laughed some more. He started out attempting to hide it, but it became impossible, even when he knew Sakura was staring at him. Even after Naruto blinked at him blankly before yelling, "Don't laugh at that, you bastard!" But Sasuke still continued, because Naruto deserved it for being a menace of a child. "Wait-" Naruto interrupted, his tone dropping, "is it a clue?!"

"It's not a *clue*," Sasuke managed through his laughter. "It's revenge."

"Revenge?" Naruto cocked his head. "He's still mad about that?!"

Sakura shook her head, and she too was laughing through her words. "First impressions always last, Naruto," she told him.

Pouting, Naruto glared at the pair of them, slightly pink in the cheeks. Taking pity on him, Sasuke pressed forward, finally able to control himself again, though there was still a persistent smile on his lips. "Come on, dumbass," he said as he brushed past him into the classroom, tossing a hand in the white-blond hair and patting some of the dust away as he

went. Naruto went even more pink at this, and the moment Sasuke's hand left his hair he used both of his own to furiously shake the rest of the chalk out of it.

The classroom was empty. Sasuke began to inspect it, the others following suit. They were silent for upwards of ten minutes. They checked under the desks, behind the chairs, by the chalkboard- they even inspected the view from the window. From this room was a clear view of the swing hanging on the tree just outside of the entrance. "Maybe it's out there?" Naruto mused out loud.

Not having anything else to go on, they went back outside to look, but the search continued to prove futile. There was nothing on the grounds out front that suggested a hidden item, neither bell nor another clue. Concentrated, Sakura furrowed her brows and thought back, "Maybe the pencil meant somewhere else?"

"Or perhaps it was a meant to misguide us," Sasuke huffed.

"Gah!" Naruto exclaimed. "I was so sure-!"

"Naruto! Sakura-" a voice called from behind them. As the three of them turned to see who it was, their old teacher from back in those days trailed a feeble "Sasuke-kun…?" that Sasuke didn't care for. He was carrying a large stack of school papers and looked like a small woodland creature that caught sight of a wolf, fixated on Sasuke.

"Iruka-sensei!" Naruto called excitedly, waving him over. "OH! Maybe you know! Did you see Kakashi-sensei here earlier?"

Iruka blinked, finally taking his eyes off of the surprise that was Sasuke. "Kakashi?" he softly repeated, like the word was only slowly starting to make sense. "Oh, yes," he managed to pull himself out of it, and the three of them gasped at the mention. "I ran into him inside just an hour or so ago. 'Said he was just 'looking around'." He frowned, remembering the encounter. "It was a little strange."

The news was intriguing, but Naruto reacted like it was the best news of his life, pressuring Iruka on with an enthusiastic, "Did he leave anything behind?! We're looking for a bell, and we think he hid it somewhere around here! It could be anywhere!"

"A- bell?" Iruka stuttered, overwhelmed. A few of his papers fluttered off of his stack, which he scrambled to grab. "No, not that I know of."

Starting to get frustrated, Sasuke sighed. Sakura asked politely, "You had said it was a little strange. Did he say anything weird to you?"

Iruka hummed, remembering the encounter. "It wasn't really a conversation. He just kind of showed up out of nowhere, and when I asked him what he was doing here, he said he was just looking around. Then he said he was on his way to get some ramen and disappeared. I never knew him as the type to get ramen before noon."

The three of them looked at one another knowingly. "Ichiraku's!" Naruto exclaimed, fist balled. "Thanks Iruka-sensei!" and he turned on his heel to leave.

“Wait,” Sasuke demanded, grabbing him by the scruff of his jacket, uncaring that Naruto had just clotheslined himself because of it. “Don’t run off without talking to us about it first.”

Rubbing his throat, Naruto questioned, “But he went to Ichiraku’s next. There’s probably another clue there.” Sasuke knew that. He just needed a minute to process it all.

They hadn’t searched the school enough to completely rule it out as a hiding place, but still Sasuke knew that it would be fruitless to continue searching here. Kakashi clearly placed the hint within Iruka; Sakura had been clever to ask him the details of the encounter. The pencil in the training field clued them in on Iruka, and Iruka clued them in on Ichiraku’s. This wasn’t hide and seek, but a treasure hunt. One that required… he sighed to himself. This game required them to not only get into the nitty-gritty of the map of the village, but to talk to its people as well. Damn him. Surely the bell would not be hiding at the ramen shop, but rather their next clue would lay with the old man who runs it. Another person who would be shocked to see Sasuke milling around.

Whatever. He didn’t care what these people thought of him. He resented them, of course, for living in peace at the cost of his clan’s genocide. Whatever atrocities they might have thought that Sasuke committed were nothing compared to their peaceful ignorance at the cost of Sasuke’s trauma. Still, he didn’t fancy the idea of having to converse with them so casually. Kakashi’s angle was, without a doubt, nefariously aimed directly at Sasuke. It left a bitter taste on his tongue.

But at the same time, Sasuke was not going to lose this game. “The next clue is definitely there,” Sasuke scolded Naruto. “I meant that you should wait for us. Unless you want another chalkboard eraser on your head.”

Naruto went pink again, glaring at Sasuke. “I can’t believe you’re still laughing at that.”

Sakura shook her head, “You’re lucky it wasn’t anything that could have decapitated you.” Shrugging she mused, “Your reaction timing is really bad when you’re not fighting. A ninja should be more vigilant.”

Grumbling, Naruto gave her the same scowl. “Why would I expect to be attacked here?”

“They’re right, Naruto,” Iruka informed, sounding exactly the way Sasuke remembered he used to sound in class. “Just because you’re not expecting an attack doesn’t mean it won’t come.”

“Yes, Iruka-sensei,” Naruto rang out sarcastically, mimicking their school days. “Hey!” he chirped, suddenly changing the subject. “Do you want to come with us? You haven’t bought me ramen in a while! And you might be able to help us find the bell!”

Sasuke’s eyebrow twitched involuntarily. Why did he not anticipate Naruto trying to invite random people onto their quest? He would probably try to bring the whole village along with them if the opportunity presented itself. “Naruto,” he called, already turning to leave before Iruka could respond. “Let’s go.”

Behind him, he knew that the three of them had responded to his rudeness with astonishment, which was too stupid of a reaction for Sasuke to bother with. All but growling to himself, Sasuke assessed that Kakashi would have been banking on Naruto chatting up every person they met along the way. It was some feeble attempt to socialize Sasuke by association. Pathetic. He heard Iruka laughing nervously, "I've got a lot of grading to catch up on! Maybe later, Naruto."

"Aw," Naruto lamented before perking up. "I'll hold you to that!" Sasuke had gained some distance between them, determinedly not slowing down, because he knew it was only a matter of time before- "Hey- Sasuke, wait up!" Sure enough, the other two followed him. Though he did have to put up with Naruto squinting at him, "Didn't you just nag me about not going off on my own without you two?"

"You were wasting time," was all he offered as an answer.

Glad that the shop wasn't too far away from the school, Sasuke tuned out the chatter as he walked a few paces ahead of them. It was more evident now what Kakashi had truly intended with this little game. As they walked the street, people's heads turned in disbelief. He wasn't wearing a hood today; hadn't thought he was going to need it, especially in this heat. Foolish of him. Whatever. He didn't care what they said when they turned back to their companions, hissing words between them; it was just annoying. Thankfully Sakura and Naruto were too busy with their own conversation to pay it much attention, which would have made things even more annoying.

Just as he thought this, one particular hiss carried a little too well. Naruto's sentence trailed off, and Sasuke turned in time to see the blue eyes warily survey the area it had come from. He didn't think Naruto had been paying enough attention to hear what was said, but his ears caught the tone well enough. Sakura didn't seem to hear it. With a pang, Sasuke realized it was because she had never had to endure this particular unpleasantry. Not like he had. And not like Naruto had, which was why he had a natural reaction toward it.

Not wanting him to put too much thought into the encounter, Sasuke paused his stride until Naruto was next to him. Making sure he was directly between Naruto and the perpetrators, Sasuke injected himself into the forefront of Naruto's mind, his body a set of blinders to keep him on track. Blue eyes blinked at him, and Sasuke could tell it was only just registering in his mind what the hiss was. Determined, Sasuke bid, "Hurry up, dumbass. You're so slow."

It worked. Naruto scowled at him, "You're the one who told me not to run off, you bastard! And you were walking in front of us- we were following *your* pace!"

"Guys, we're here," Sakura interrupted.

Sure enough, they were outside the small stand. Naruto clapped his hands together, "Right! Kakashi-sensei's hint for us to eat a bowl of ramen in order to find the bell!"

That earned him a knock on the head, Sakura riling up, "We're not here to eat, Naruto! We just need to talk to Teuchi-san!" So Sakura figured it out, too, then. Of course she did; she was always bright. But was she able to use that information to see what the real meaning behind this game was?

After a yelp, Naruto rubbed his head, “Aw, come on, what if that’s what we’re supposed to do?”

“You’re wasting time,” Sasuke told him. “Just go in and ask the old man what Kakashi did when he was here this morning.”

Pouting indignantly, Naruto crossed his arms. “You know it’s rude to drop in on a shop to ask questions without buying anything.” Like Sasuke cared about being polite. Staring him down, Naruto seemed to come to that fact on his own as well, because he sighed his disappointment, “Right. Okay, we’ll just go in and ask him.”

When the curtain pulled aside, it was obvious that their clue had nothing to do with the old man behind the counter. Empty bowls piled on the counter before three of their old classmates; Shikamaru and Ino looked exasperated as they waited for the third one (Sasuke did not remember his name) to finish another helping. Crap. He might have fled, except it was too late. Ino had already spotted him, the chopsticks in her hand clattering to the floor. “Sasuke-kun?!” she exclaimed.

He hummed noncommittally, doing his best to not roll his eyes so obviously. He was more interested in finding a way to subtly assess Shikamaru, who looked completely unphased by the three of them, specifically Sasuke. He didn’t much care for Shikamaru. He couldn’t remember much of anything about him from their school days, besides his kekkei genkai and his intelligence, which was like another kekkei genkai of the Nara clan within itself. That was all Sasuke had learned of him, and it came from doing his research on possible opponents for the last round of the Chunin exams. He knew he was now Kakashi’s assistant; they occasionally would run into each other in the office, but Shikamaru never stayed long after Sasuke arrived.

It took Sasuke’s name to make the third one set his bowl to the counter and turn around. “Oh, it’s you three,” Naruto said rather huffishly, probably jealous of their meal.

Wasting no time, Ino jumped up from her seat, “What a surprise to see you this morning, Sasuke-kun!”

Truly oblivious, Naruto pushed forward, “Never mind that!” He slammed his hands on the counter. “Oi, old man! We’ve got a question for you!”

“Oh, Naruto!” The old man greeted, “Would you like me to fix you-”

“Don’t even bother, Naruto,” Sasuke was quick to say before he finished the offer. He could feel his eyebrow twitch. “He doesn’t have the clue.”

“What are you talking about?” Naruto asked him, animatedly waving his hands at the shop owner. “Wasn’t the clue that we had to come to Ichiraku’s?!”

At the same time, Sakura came onto his wavelength. “You don’t think he-?”

He knew it seemed very unlikely, but it was even more so unlikely that he was wrong. “Who’s paying for you guys’ meal?”

Ino and the other shinobi, whom Sasuke knew must be from the Akimichi clan, certainly showed their confusion quite plainly, but Sasuke knew to look for Shikamaru's reaction. Sure enough, he smirked at the question. Ino answered, her voice perplexed, "Kakashi-sama had offered to buy us an early lunch."

This was like the detonator to Naruto's bomb. "*WHAT*?!" he exclaimed, and the rest of them almost blew away in his wind. "You mean to tell me Kakashi-sensei offered to buy your guys' ramen?! Kakashi-sensei doesn't even buy *me* ramen! What's he doing going around and offering it to you three for?!"

"Shikamaru *is* his assistant, I'll have you know," Ino argued back on a thin temper.

"I'm his student!" Naruto pointed to himself in emphasis. "If he should be buying anyone ramen, it should be me!"

Sakura knocked him on the head again, effectively calming him down by illuminating, "Who cares about that? This is our clue!"

Naruto paused for a moment, "…Our clue? Our clue! Hey, did Kakashi say anything strange to you three when he offered to buy you lunch?"

A redundant question: Kakashi offering to buy anyone something was strange within itself. And it was obvious that Shikamaru would be the one with the clue. Ino, for her part, shrugged, coming to the truthful conclusion, "There's little that man says that isn't strange."

"I tend not to question when people offer me free food," the Akimichi shinobi answered rightfully before turning back to the counter. As much as he resented to admit it, Sasuke had to hand it to Kakashi for choosing these three for this part of the game; he knew it would take them a while to finish their meal, giving Team Seven plenty of time to dally around at the school. It had been a gamble on if Kakashi would actually go so far as to pay for all of this ramen, especially considering it was incredibly out of character for him to buy even one dango for someone else.

Sasuke kept studying Shikamaru, who met his gaze as if it was a challenge. "He said a lot of strange things this morning. The one that I'm sure you're interested in, though, I'm not allowed to say, yet. I was specifically told to not tell you guys anything unless Sasuke asked for it."

Jaw clenching, Sasuke halted. He could barely keep the animosity in him from seeping out of his pores. All eyes were on him then, which was annoying and bothersome, because he was trying to not fume. "Wait- you knew Sasuke-kun was going to be here?!" Ino exclaimed, and for once Sasuke was glad to have her pull focus.

"Wait- do you have a clue?!" Naruto turned to him in surprise. "Tell us! Where did Kakashi hide the bell?!"

"Bell? What bell?" Ino asked.

Shikamaru shrugged at him, turning back to lean his elbows on the counter. “Sorry, Naruto,” he said as though completely unapologetic. “He was very insistent on me not saying anything unless Sasuke was the one to ask for the clue.”

He didn’t want to admit how almost painful the thought of doing so was. Kakashi had certainly stooped as low as he possibly could. This bit was clearly about breaking Sasuke’s pride; he imagined Kakashi sitting back and tapping his fingers together evilly before pulling the strings of his little puppet scheme. Sasuke didn’t need to ask for help from Shikamaru. He didn’t want anyone in this village to help him, even with something as stupid as this dumb game. “Just tell us the clue,” he demanded, preserving his dignity.

He knew that Shikamaru didn’t like him, which was perfectly fine by Sasuke, who never cared for him either way. But it was downright infuriating when he nonchalantly tapped his chopsticks to the side of his bowl, “He did put a lot of emphasis on the ‘*ask*’ portion of that request.”

For a lasting wave, Sasuke remembered his plans from before the war about destroying this entire place. It certainly would have saved him a lot of headache. Nervously, Sakura laughed, coming close to Sasuke’s side to attempt, “Well, I’m sure he would have known Sasuke-kun well enough to know what he meant!” With this, Sasuke was able to calm down slightly due to the awkwardness. Of course Kakashi wouldn’t have let him slide with that. But he found himself grateful that she had attempted to come to his side, even though he did expect it.

“Oi, Sasuke, just ask for the clue,” Naruto told him.

“Shut up, dumbass!” Sasuke snapped at him, his composure lost.

Glaring, Naruto leaned into Sasuke’s face. “What’s so hard about it? Weren’t you the one complaining about wasting time?” Idiot. Sasuke clenched his jaw tightly, closing his eyes to keep his distance from the rest of them without taking what would have been a pathetic step backward.

“Leave him alone, Naruto,” Sakura told him.

Unable to stand how big of a deal everyone was making this out to be, Sasuke bit the bullet. “What was Kakashi’s clue?” he managed to say with an upward infliction to his voice, intentionally making it undeniably a question, but making it nonetheless clear that it was only because he was being forced.

When Shikamaru smirked again, Sasuke remembered that he had the ability to create an ever-burning fire without even needing to lift a finger. It would be unequivocally easy to do, all things considered. A little chakra spent and a lot of headache erased. Shikamaru must have use those deductive reasoning skills to know not to push any further than he already had. “Go to the hospital,” he told them simply.

“The hospital?” Sakura mused aloud.

With a sigh, Shikamaru continued, “He wanted me to give you some annoying riddle, but I can’t be bothered with repeating it, so I figured it out for you. The hospital. Go there.”

Sasuke wasn't going to waste another second. As he turned, he could hear Ino berating Shikamaru, "What do you mean 'go to the hospital'? What are you telling them to go there for?" He was almost gone when she called out to him, "Wait! Sasuke-kun!" He was too close to pretend like he couldn't hear her, so he stopped. "Happy birthday!"

He hummed at her in response before leaping away, ignoring Naruto's shouts at him. Annoying as the whole ordeal was, there was some other importance in leaving as quickly as possible, lest the fumes of the ramen make it impossible for Naruto to resist ordering a bowl. Perhaps he could blame that on why he left so suddenly, choosing the quickest way to their next destination by travelling by rooftop.

Feeling more determined to find that damn bell than ever, Sasuke quickened his pace. Judging by the track record, who would the next person be? Tsunade, maybe? They were going to the hospital, after all. Behind him, he could hear Naruto yelling at him to slow down, once again throwing Sasuke's words from earlier about not running off alone back at him. Whatever. The quicker this game ended, the better. At this point, he didn't care if Naruto went off on his own again, as long as he found that stupid bell on his way.

He almost realized too late that choosing to go by rooftop was a mistake. The water towers came into view first, long since having been repaired. In fact, they were two completely different towers; he remembered once again how the whole town was rebuilt. It was too easy to forget with how exactly everything had been reconstructed. Expertly, Sasuke landed instead down on the grass out in front of the building, avoiding the rooftop at all costs. If Naruto and Sakura had the same dread at the location, which they probably did, they did not mention it when they landed on the lawn next to him moments later.

Humming, Naruto pondered aloud, "You don't think this could be the actual hiding spot this time, do you?"

"No," Sasuke voiced bluntly. This certainly wasn't the spot they needed. He turned to Sakura, "Well? Any ideas?" She seemed taken aback. A little frustrated that she always acted so dumb around him (which he was well aware was not her normal personality), he pressed, "You work here, don't you?"

"Well, yeah, but-" She shrugged one shoulder, overwhelmed by the large building, "I really can't see why Kakashi wanted us to come here, except…" By the way she trailed off, Sasuke knew for certain that he was not the only one thinking of those water towers. But that could not be the location Kakashi picked for them. That was where everything between Team Seven fell apart. It would be counterproductive to put a clue up there.

He knew she was tactful enough to not mention it, but Naruto definitely wasn't. Before he had the dumb idea to voice it, Sasuke picked her brain. "Is there anyone here right now he would have planted a clue on?"

That sparked something in her. With a snap of her finger into her palm, she realized, "Guy is here today! He has physical therapy." She ran off, but curiously did not go inside the building, instead running around to the back. Sasuke couldn't quite place who exactly 'Guy' was, but if he was important enough for her to run off like that, then he probably had the next clue.

Evidently, physical therapy was out in the back courtyard. Sasuke remembered who Guy was instantly; name notwithstanding, the rest of him was pretty unforgettable. As they made their way around the corner, two green figures came into view, but that wasn't the first indication that they were there.

Sasuke could never understand how two such profound ninjas could be so boisterous. Apprehensively, he assessed Lee. He looked just as deceptively weak as when Sasuke first met him. Of course he was just the opposite; after all of these years, Sasuke was certain Lee's taijutsu would be much more fearsome than back then. Strange appearance aside, Sasuke owed a lot to Lee. Much of his taijutsu style was still just an echo of Lee's, at least in its foundations.

It wasn't until they came to a stop that Sasuke realized there was a girl amongst them as well; with how energetic the other two were, her quiet exasperation as she sat cross-legged on a large boulder was certainly easy to overlook. She was the first to spot them, though, "Team… Seven?" She didn't show surprise at seeing them until Sasuke came into view. Even if he didn't know her, she seemed to know who he was.

Against all odds, Guy and Lee managed to hear her and follow her gaze. "Wow! Sasuke-kun!" Lee called to him, and Sasuke grimaced.

"What a surprise!" Guy added. "What brings you to the village, today?"

"Hey, we're here too, you know!" Naruto exclaimed.

Sighing, Sasuke confronted the fact that Naruto still harbored a childish jealousy about Sasuke receiving any amount of attention more than him. As if he wanted to be singled out in this way. To add salt to his wound, Lee came forward to Sakura, grasping her hand. "And Sakura-chan! How are you today?"

She smiled sweetly, also ignoring the fumes coming from the giant toddler next to her, "We're doing good! We have a question for you three."

Something about that question made Sasuke's eyebrows furrow. 'You three.' He looked around, wondering why that felt wrong. The realization hit not long after- Neji. *That* was a name he knew. He only had a few seconds to wonder where the Hyuuga was before he remembered. Right. Not that Sasuke was too emotional about it, but it was a shame that probably the only other Leaf ninja he respected died in the war. That wasn't to say Sasuke liked him, per say, just respected. The branch family of the Hyuuga had suffered enough in this village, just like the Uchiha, that he didn't hate them as much as the others. And Neji had been an excellent fighter; the twelve-year-old in him still longed to have a proper battle with him.

"A question for us?" Lee asked, revered.

"Why are you so shocked, Lee?" Guy asked, already embellishing the situation, striking a pose with his good arm, completely unbothered by the limitations the wheelchair gave him. "We're highly intelligent people, aren't we? Why wouldn't everyone come flocking to us with their inquiries."

Passionate, Lee turned to his teacher, “You’re right! I can’t speak for myself, but you, Sensei, are the wisest of us all! I consider myself very lucky to be able to learn from you every day!”

Sasuke turned a pitiful glance toward the girl, who seemed to be so used to these displays that all she gave into it was another sigh. “Can you guys let them ask their question?”

“Yeah, have you guys seen Kakashi-sensei around today?” Naruto interjected, his bitterness apparently forgotten for the time being in favor of finding the bell. “Maybe he was trying to hide something small?”

“Ah! Kakashi! My rival!” Guy embellished with a toothy grin. “I see Kakashi almost every day, of course. He said he was too busy today to try me at a game of Rock-Paper-Scissors- a shame. Perhaps he was too scared of losing his track record this time and didn’t want to risk the loss! I wouldn’t want you three to take Kakashi for a coward, of course, but it’s a perfectly natural to be intimidated by my power.”

As ridiculous as it was, Sasuke thought back to what he knew of how Guy ended up in this chair, and he had to concede that the man did certainly have power. But it would have been easier to respect if he wasn’t so… theatrical about it all. It was tiresome to listen to. So he focused his question toward the girl he still had no memory of, the only normal one of the bunch, “Did he say anything before he left? Where he was going, maybe?”

She answered him back normally, and Sasuke had to appreciate that she wasn’t one of those girls who was annoying toward him. “He said that he had to get back to work, and that he had things to do at the office. I didn’t see him hide anything. Why didn’t you guys check his office first if you were looking for him?”

“We’re not actually looking for him,” Sakura told her. “He hid something and told us that it’s our mission today to find it. It’s kind of been like a treasure hunt.”

In awe, Lee clenched his fist, turning to his teacher. “Guy-sensei! That sounds like a really fun exercise! Perhaps we can do that, too!”

Guy tapped a finger to his bottom lip, thinking it over. “A treasure hunt, huh? Something that you have to work together to figure out.” Then, as if presenting his students with a treat, he gave them a flamboyant thumbs up, accompanied by the flash of his white teeth. “I will prepare you two the most rewarding treasure hunt yet!”

Sasuke would have rolled his eyes, but he already had a headache. Sakura smiled at them, exasperated, before turning back to him and Naruto. “What do you guys think? To the Hokage office?”

Just as Sasuke was about to agree, he was cut off by Naruto, who chose this moment to get animated. “Hey! You guys stole Kakashi-sensei’s idea!” he yelled, as if it mattered at all.

For his part, Lee bowed deeply. “We mean no disrespect! The concept of a treasure hunt to promote team bonding is very tempting!” He straightened up. “As a consolation, would you like to join us on our own treasure hunt when Guy-sensei prepares it for us?”

Sasuke glared at Naruto, the idiot, as he thought about it for a moment. “Okay! It’s a deal! But we should make it a competition, instead! You guys against us three-” that was where Sasuke drew the line. He pinched Naruto by the ear and started dragging him away from the conversation, lest he end up with the grand delusion that Sasuke would ever agree to such a dumb event. Protesting, Naruto stumbled behind him, crying out in pain.

Once they were far enough away, Sasuke dropped Naruto’s ear. “What did I say about wasting time,” he scolded. Uncaring that Naruto was pouting at him, Sasuke jumped away toward their next destination. Rooftop was definitely the best way to travel; he didn’t fancy having to distract Naruto from the whispers again.

He forgot to avoid the water towers, though. He managed one leap before they caught his eye, and a jolt of electricity hit his stomach. But then he realized that the jolt had nothing to do with the towers, and everything to do with the tuft of white hair peeking out from behind them. Kakashi waved at him, smiling that toying grin, before disappearing. It didn’t surprise Sasuke at all that Kakashi was monitoring them- the opposite, in fact. He had expected it. Still, he stood frozen on the neighboring rooftop, staring in the direction of the puff of smoke behind the water tower.

This became a problem once Sakura and Naruto joined him, following his gaze. Shit. They were probably thinking he was getting emotional over the damn towers. By the way Sakura’s hand rested on his shoulder, he was sure of it. “L-Let’s go to the office!” She attempted.

He hadn’t planned on telling them that Kakashi had been spying (he would have preferred to keep that another silent battle between himself and their teacher), but it wouldn’t do to have these two get the wrong idea. Especially since he knew Naruto was itching to say something dumb. “Kakashi was there,” he said simply before Naruto had the chance.

“He’s following us?!” Naruto exclaimed.

“Of course he’s following us,” Sasuke reprimanded. Honestly. “I’m just surprised he showed himself to me so willingly.” That was definitely something. No doubt he had been tailing them this whole time; Sasuke hadn’t been concerned with keeping tabs on him during this, because he was certain it wouldn’t help them find the bell faster. But now- was this to throw them off? Sasuke knew he wouldn’t have hidden anything at the water towers. Why, then, did he show himself there?

It wasn’t until Sakura pondered aloud, “I wonder why he would choose that spot…” that Sasuke realized exactly why Kakashi wanted the three of them to face that location. It had nothing to do with the bell, but everything to do with the other game between Kakashi and himself.

Not wanting to give Kakashi that win, he once again turned his body toward the direction of the center of the village. “Come on,” he urged, disappearing before either of the other two began the conversation Kakashi was attempting to ensure. He didn’t want to give Kakashi the satisfaction of tapping into his deeper emotions, so Sasuke told himself that he was angry. Why would he care to think back on that day? Sasuke had an abundance of respect for his old teacher, but at the moment there wasn’t anyone else on the planet he disliked more.

When he opened the door to Kakashi's office, he was met face-to-face with a sure contender to that.

There was really no way Sasuke could come up with an answer as to why the Kazekage was sitting at the Hokage desk today, of all days. If there was one thing Sasuke was certain of, however, it was that Gaara definitely matched his disliking, as evident by the pure look of distain he surveyed Sasuke with. He barely even gave an indication of shock first. In the corner of his eye, he was able to register the other two in the room: Gaara's siblings, who were frozen at the interruption, mid-sentence. The four of them were completely still and silent for several long moments; that was until Naruto finally caught up with him, stumbling into Sasuke's side as it was blocking the doorway. "Sasuke…-?" he mumbled in confusion before he noticed who was in the room. "Gaara!" he called excitedly, pushing past Sasuke to run up to the desk. "What are you doing here?!"

He didn't like the way Gaara stopped glaring at him to turn a soft gaze at Naruto. "There's a meeting here tomorrow about the upcoming Chunin exams."

So focused on the simmering rage inside him, Sasuke jumped slightly at the gentle hand on his shoulder. Sakura was behind him. "You should have told me you were coming!" Naruto said happily, his proverbial tail wagging. "How long will you be here?"

"We're leaving tomorrow evening," Gaara told him.

"We should get something to eat tomorrow before you go! We haven't seen each other in forever!" Naruto offered brightly. "I'd say we should hang out now, but we're kind of in the middle of something. Say- do you have a clue for us?" It was evident by their expressions that the three Sand ninja were unaware of the game. "Oh, right," Naruto realized and began explaining. "Kakashi-sensei hid a little bell somewhere in the village, and we're trying to find it. So far we've checked the school, Ichiraku's, and the hospital. Oh, and the training field we used to practice in. Would you guys happen to know of a place we still need to check?"

Gaara's sister crossed her arms, "Why would we know that? We don't live here." Sasuke squinted at her. He knew her name at one point, but he couldn't quite remember. Both her and her brother had made it to the last round of the Chunin exams, and he could recall their fighting styles, but not their names. He had been more preoccupied with Gaara at the time.

Beside him, Sakura clarified, "What Naruto *meant* to say was: did you guys see the Hokage here earlier? I suppose he gave you access to his office?"

At that the brother, scoffed, mirroring his sister's stance. "Only for like three seconds. We had some stuff we had to go over with him before tomorrow's meeting, but he brushed us off."

Sasuke really didn't want to have this conversation with the Kazekage, so he waited for Sakura to ask the questions. "Did he say anything about where he was going?"

"You think if he did, we would still be here? We'd be following him and tying him down to his desk," the sister grumbled, clutching that giant fan of hers menacingly. "When you guys find him, do us a favor and drag him back here."

“He took today off.” Naruto defended, sounding disappointed at the prospect of Kakashi having to brush them off later for Hokage business.

“You can’t take a day off from being a Kage,” the brother spat.

Frustrated that this was taking longer than necessary, Sasuke finally caved, having lost faith that his teammates could stay on track. He took two steps into the room, “What did he say when you guys spoke to him.” It was short and clipped, a statement, not a question.

Gaara wasn’t the only one with animosity toward him, that was clear. The other two hesitated to answer his demand as well, abrasive defenses up. He wished there was an easy way to signal to Naruto that *he* had to be the one to ask that question; he could say the exact same words as Sasuke had and the three of them would probably stumble over each other to answer him. Normally Sasuke wouldn’t care that people didn’t like talking to him, because he didn’t like talking to people, either. However, this specific instance required answers, and his normal means of getting answers would not go over so well with Team Seven witnessing them used on their friends.

Somehow, Naruto was still the reason they answered him; it was something to do with the expectant way he was waiting for them to reply, completely oblivious to the hostility. Sasuke was at least grateful that they, too, didn’t want to tarnish Naruto’s delusion that his friends were anything but cordial with each other. Gaara answered, “He didn’t seem prepared to see us, even though we sent a message a week ago saying we would be coming a day early.”

“We told him we had stuff to discuss with him and then he waved us off into here and told us to wait for him, but that was over an hour ago,” the sister complained bitterly. “If you guys are telling us that he ditched the Kazekage for a childish game…” she trailed off threateningly.

Fruitlessly, Naruto waved his hands, “Ah- no- you see, it’s not that he meant anything by it, it’s just that- well, it’s Sasuke’s birthday, and it’s been a while since we’ve all been together, and-” Sasuke flashed his eyes toward him. As if these three would care about that. Sure enough, judging by the looks on their faces, they did not in the slightest. It’s not like it was *their* fault their teacher was a giant flake who couldn’t keep his days straight.

He didn’t really want to be here anymore- fuck the clue. As he turned back toward the door, he called. “Come on. These guys don’t have a clue for us. Let’s regroup and talk through our options.”

“Wait!” Naruto cried back. “What if it’s hidden in here? We should check the drawers-”

“It’s not,” Sasuke assured, only turning his head to address him. “He left too quickly to have hidden it in here. My guess is he was in too much of a rush after these guys showed up to even plant a clue here.”

Beside him, Sakura pondered, “Hmm. I don’t know. He could have still managed to leave a hint. He’s quick, don’t forget.”

Sasuke didn’t forget. He insisted again, “There’s nothing here. Let’s go.”

Naruto sighed his annoyance at him, but still made his way out of the room. At the door, he turned back to Gaara. “We’ll get dinner tomorrow, right?”

“Yes,” Gaara agreed, and Sasuke couldn’t fathom why that made him so angry. Something about how excited Naruto looked at the promise, combined with the soft expression on the Kazekage’s face. Or, well. As soft as it could be. Sasuke remembered too well that murderous aura he used to always wear back during the Chunin exams. He remembered how insane he had looked that time Sasuke managed to pierce his absolute defense, making him bleed for the first time in his life. It was crazy to think this was the same person and even crazier to see him be almost pleasant to Naruto. Well. Naruto did have that effect. He supposed it didn’t really matter, anyway. The charm that Naruto had casted on him was Gaara’s only saving grace. Perhaps Gaara was thinking the same thing about him, in turn.

Just as he was about to let his anger go, watching Naruto turn to be the first to leave out the door, Sasuke spotted a curious flow of chakra. Sand hovered near Naruto’s right shoulder. Instantly, Sasuke set the miniscule Optic Nerve alight in his black flames.

This caused a small commotion. Naruto, who had been oblivious to the sand eye, was definitely not so oblivious to the black fire that had erupted suddenly on his shoulder. The sand had burned away just as quickly as it came, so everyone else in the room only caught the tail end of it. Naruto’s expression was wild with his bewilderment as he spun around, but Sasuke couldn’t spare it much mind. Instead, he doubled down his glare at Gaara.

He had been trying to plant his eye on Naruto. Foolish of him to think Sasuke wouldn’t notice it was there. Not with these eyes. What was his angle? Sasuke didn’t think Gaara mistrusted Naruto- perhaps he was planning on using it to find Kakashi, but he wasn’t so sure. Sasuke was well aware that Gaara considered Naruto in high regard. So then why? It almost felt like he was doing it to *protect* Naruto. From what-?

Oh.

“Sasuke! Oi! What the hell-?” Naruto was getting noisy, now.

“Let’s go,” Sasuke insisted, his message to Gaara having been made perfectly clear.

“I *was* going!” Naruto continued as Sasuke brushed past him, pretending to not be on such high alert, lest Gaara still try to plant a bug on him. But thankfully as Sasuke turned back to him as soon as he was out of view, there wasn’t any other traces of chakra to be seen on him other than his own. “You tried to set me on fire!”

Now Sasuke had to deal with this. As he sighed, trying to find an excuse, Sakura spoke for him, “There was a bug about to land on you.” Sasuke flashed his eyes to her, but she was convincingly addressing Naruto. So she evidentially saw the sand and also wasn’t keen on explaining to Naruto why Gaara would have done that. And so once again, Sasuke felt a confusing rush of appreciation for her.

It was a good cover. Naruto blinked at them for a moment but took the bait. “You could have just swatted it like a normal person.” Sasuke rolled his eyes. “So then what do we do now? Our trail has run cold.”

He was too right. Bitterly, Sasuke thought back to the office. He wished he had more time to actually search the room, even if he didn't think the bell would be hidden there. Sakura counted of their list so far, "Well we spoke to Iruka-sensei, Team Ten, Team Guy… it seems like we're only missing Team Eight. And maybe Sai?"

Naruto hummed, "Hmm, yeah! That would make sense! Even if we don't have the clue to where they are, that's probably where the next clue is."

This was exasperating. Sasuke had gotten bored of this game. As much as he really wanted to win, traipsing around in his past was exhausting and annoying. As he thought this, Sasuke caught a tuft of white hair coming from behind a distant tree. It disappeared as soon as he spotted it, but Sasuke could still sense the familiar chakra. The bastard.

Not having anything else to go on, they set out in search of Team Eight, who ended up being in a different training field. When they came up to the trio, who all looked out of breath, they weren't met with too much surprise. This group specialized in scouting missions, after all, so it would have been worrisome if they had been caught off guard.

Of course, that didn't stop the loud one from exclaiming, "What's *he* doing here?!" blatantly in Sasuke's face.

Hilarious. Sasuke had never been less amused. But because he was Naruto, Naruto responded, "What's that supposed to mean?! Sasuke can be anywhere he wants to be in the village! That's a really shitty way to repay him for saving your life!"

It would have been far less embarrassing if Naruto had not spoken, he thought as he cringed to himself. The loud one, the one that must be from the Inuzuka clan, only scoffed, one hand on the head of his large white dog, "Whatever. It's just weird to see him here, that's all."

"Kiba," the other shinobi interrupted coolly, his voice monotone. With the chakra in clumps wriggling all over his body, Sasuke remembered the bugs. Aburame clan. Shino. He had helped Sasuke by taking on Gaara's brother during the attack at the Chunin exams. "That was insensitive for you to say. That is because of the tone in which you had said it. Naruto had worked hard to bring Sasuke back, and so you should not be surprised to see him here. Even if he had not spent much time here at all since the war ended."

Sasuke would rather have been ripping off his own toenails than sitting here listening to this. He bit his tongue with a stiffened jaw, hand planted firmly on his hip. Before he could stew too much about it, he felt that familiar arm sling itself over his shoulders. Just like that Naruto was in his space, which definitely was not new, but certainly was overwhelming as of late. "Of course he's back! I told you he would be!"

"Naruto," he said loudly, desperate to stifle this conversation. "Just ask them about Kakashi."

It was a mistake to turn to look at him in that moment. His eyes were ridiculously blue up this close, blinking twice before remembering the entire point of them finding these three. "Oh! Yeah!" with that he dropped Sasuke's shoulders, and Sasuke couldn't fathom why he felt so prickly at the loss of contact. "You guys saw Kakashi earlier, right?"

“What? The Hokage?” the Inuzuka, Kiba, questioned. Sasuke was forced to focus back on his peculiar tone. “Why would we have seen him?”

Just as surprised as he was, Sakura’s shoulders dropped, “Wait. You mean you didn’t run into him today?”

“I find it quite concerning that you assume we would have run into the Hokage,” Shino elaborated, face ducked behind the fabric of his hood. “Running into him is not the usual for us three, for he was not once our teacher, like he was for you.”

“No, no,” Sakura insisted with a shake of her pink head. “Kakashi was running into everyone earlier today. He was setting up a game for us. We just assumed because all of our other clues were centered around running into everyone else that you would have been in on it as well. Are you sure you didn’t run into him? Or maybe see him in passing at all? Hinata?”

At the call of her name, the quiet girl Sasuke hardly noticed shook her head. She had been trying to make herself look small, it seemed. “No, we didn’t,” she answered with that peep of a voice. Hinata… this was the Hyuuga girl; he would recognize the Byakugan from any distance. Sasuke squinted at her. He had absolutely no memory of her. Had they really been in the same class for years? And a Hyuuga. Sasuke had never noticed her.

“Hey- wait!” Naruto jumped at the sight of her. He walked up close to her, and Sasuke noticed the slight blush on her cheeks become more pronounced as he did. “Hinata- can you do us a favor?” He didn’t give her any time to respond before asking, “Can you use your Byakugan to help us find the bell?”

Rightfully, she tilted her head in polite but utter confusion. “B-Bell…?”

“That’s what Kakashi hid from us! We have to try to find the bell that he hid somewhere in the village. With your Byakugan, that should be easy, right?” He pressed, and the poor girl looked like she was going into heart failure at having been spoken to. Perhaps she had been such a minor threat with anxiety like that, Sasuke had not found it necessary to remember her.

Sakura slapped Naruto’s arm, “That’s *cheating*, Naruto.” At this point, Sasuke didn’t care about cheating. He was tired of this game.

After a yelp of pain, Naruto whined, “No it’s not! He didn’t give us any rules for us to break! After all, wasn’t the whole point of this exercise about asking for help from others?”

As he said it, Sasuke felt like he had just lost all connection to his outward thought. His brain short-circuited around the phrase three or four times. The whole point of this exercise was about asking for help from others. Isn’t that what Shikamaru had demanded of him at the ramen shop? *The whole point of this exercise was about asking for help from others*. Wildly, Sasuke remembered back to him predicting that Naruto would be the one to figure the exercise out first. He had cracked it- how many clues ago? How long had he been sitting on that revelation, completely unaware that it was the key to finding the bell? Sasuke was following the pattern, of course he was, and so was Sakura because it was so *obvious*. This clue will lead to someone who will have the next clue, and someone else will have the next one after that.

But they had to *ask* for the clue. He could still taste the bitter words on his tongue. And he and Sakura knew it too, because they came looking for Team Eight even when their last lead came to an abrupt halt. But for some reason neither of them had been able to lay it out in such plain terms, in a way that made it evident that *that's* what they were supposed to be analyzing. They had been thinking too deeply about it. It was such an obvious thing that neither of them deemed it worthy of giving it a second thought.

Suddenly, he cared about not cheating again. He cut Sakura off with a hand to her shoulder, who had been lecturing Naruto about integrity. "Wait," he forced her to acknowledge the epiphany he had just come to. "Naruto, repeat what you had just said."

The look on Naruto's face was one that Sasuke remembered vividly from their days back in the academy. The expression of him when he was completely cheesing an answer, rubbing the back of his head and grinning sheepishly, "I- uh. That the point of this exercise is for us to ask people to help us find the bell, so asking Hinata to use her Byakugan to find it wouldn't be cheating?"

"Exactly," he said, and both Sakura and Naruto blanched in disbelief. "We're supposed to ask for help."

He turned to give Sakura an even look, watching her face fall through the stages of realization in its many forms. "That's what this exercise is about. Asking for help." She then snapped her head to Hinata, mumbling almost robotically, "So then it wouldn't be cheating to ask Hinata-chan to look for it for us."

"No," he denied quickly, because it was now, with this realization cracking the mystery, important to him again to find the bell on the correct terms. "We haven't asked everyone we could yet."

This cryptic way of talking had Naruto thoroughly bewildered. "Uh- hey guys? What are you on about?"

Annoyed, Sasuke berated him, "We're supposed to ask people for help finding the bell."

"…Yes?"

"Who is the only person who knows where the bell is hidden. Who is the only person we haven't asked yet," he said as plainly as he could.

It must have been the pure outrageousness of it all that made Sakura still not get there, but it only took Naruto a moment before he shouted, as though tormented, "*You mean we're just supposed to ask Kakashi-sensei where he hid the bell*!?" With it spelled out for her, Sakura reacted to this with an animated noise of anguish, forgetting herself.

Sasuke felt their suffering. This whole damn time he was skipping off with all of these old faces in this wretched town that he despised when it could have all been over with by just *asking Kakashi where it was*. To make himself feel worse, he remembered at the very start of it all, asking Kakashi the parameters of where the bell could be hidden, and Kakashi had hummed to himself in amusement. Damn asshole. He knew Kakashi must have been having a

joyous time this morning, wherever he was hidden right now watching them. There were several veins popping on his forehead as he tried to keep himself from lighting the whole field on fire. Biting his resolve one last time, he asked, “Hinata. Can you find where Kakashi is right now?”

“O-Oh,” she stuttered, but nodded all the same. “Yes.” Her Byakugan was powerful, and it only took her a moment of concentration after activating it before she turned it off. “He’s in another training field. The one-”

“We know the one,” Sasuke told her, his rudeness an extent of his exasperation that their teacher was bringing them back to the same training field they started with.

As Team 7 took a moment to collect themselves from the physical pain their realizations came to, Shino spoke in that monotone voice he always did, but somehow sounded so much more bitter than usual. “Was this an exercise that involved everyone else in the village, but excluded us?”

And it just added more salt to Sasuke’s open, bleeding, infected wound. “No,” he replied with a twitch of his eyebrow. “You guys not having a clue was integral to this.” Kakashi intended for their trail to run cold at the office. He intended for them to think of everyone else they could ask to try to get back on track. How long had Kakashi planned this out? It had seemed at first that this was something he had come up with on the fly, but perhaps this was something he had in the works for a while. Years, maybe. Tailored tighter by this specific weakness of Sasuke’s.

And yeah, Sasuke was peeved about Kakashi seeing that in him. Sasuke could ask people for help. He had formed Taka, hadn’t he? Just because Sasuke wasn’t fond of mingling with Konoha, specifically. And he knew that was the whole point: to try to get him to warm back up to the village. Well. How did that go for him? Sasuke hated them even more, now. He thought back to the whispers he had to distract Naruto from. He thought back to moments ago, the Inuzuka’s displeasure at seeing him. To Gaara. Iruka being unable to both look at him and away from him at the same time. What good did this do?

The journey over to the training field with the posts went quick, but in that amount of time Sasuke’s head whirled endlessly with aggravation. Sure enough, Kakashi was leaning with his back against the middle post and reading one of his stupid books. “Oh, hello!” he called brightly, absentmindedly flipping a page. “Are you guys finished already?”

Sasuke wasn’t the only one annoyed with the outcome of the game. Naruto pointed animatedly at their teacher, “Kakashi-sensei! You have the bell, don’t you?”

Kakashi didn’t respond, only raising his eyebrow at them. Sakura slapped Naruto on the back of the head, “Idiot! That’s not what you’re supposed to do,” she berated him before turning politely back to Kakashi. “Kakashi-sensei, can you help us find the bell you hid?”

With that, Kakashi smiled. He fished into his pocket and with a small chime pulled out the silver bell. “You mean this one?” Naruto yelled, somehow surprised that that had worked. This was the moment; had Kakashi still had his Sharingan, Sasuke might not have been able to pull it off. But Kakashi was slower than he had been, and Sasuke much, much quicker. On

top of this, Kakashi wasn't exceptionally versed in this particular jutsu of Sasuke's quite yet. There was a sharp twinge in his eye as he activated the Rinnegan's power. The bell disappeared into the portal, only to reappear a second later just above his outstretched hand, switching places with the shuriken he had been holding. The action made Kakashi's expression fall, one more tiny victory for Sasuke. "I was going to hand it to you, you know."

Smirking, Sasuke gripped the damn thing tightly in his fist. "Couldn't risk it." The jutsu had taken more out of him than he expected. The objects were small and Sasuke had to be meticulous about it.

Kakashi sighed with an exaggerated shrug. "I suppose you guys still pass."

"What the hell, Sensei?" Naruto exclaimed. "What kind of exercise was that?"

"Sorry, Naruto," he apologized in that unapologetic way of his. "This one wasn't exactly geared toward you."

The point flew right over his blond head. "What's that supposed to mean?" Sasuke, for his part, did what he could to act as uninterested as possible, blandly studying the small, stupid prize in his hand.

But he knew Kakashi wasn't going to let him off the hook. "One of the most valuable things as a ninja is the trust of your comrades. Being able to let go of your pride and fall back on one another is a great strength." Sasuke scoffed. What bullshit. Everyone in this village certainly 'fell back' on his clan's genocide. Besides, he had gotten exceptionally far on his own, and when he did require help, he went and got it. He knew whom he could trust and whom he couldn't. He could feel the anger in him bubbling ominously the longer he thought about it.

Continuing to ignore the lecture, Sasuke gave one last scornful glare at the small bell pinched between his fingers. Frustrated, he shoved it into Naruto's hand, forcing him to take it in his bewilderment. As he walked away, he registered Sakura calling his name, and Naruto asking almost quietly, "Sasuke? Where are you going?"

"I have stuff to do," he told them, not stopping.

"But- the ceremony-" Sakura insisted.

With that, Sasuke didn't care anymore. "I made it up."

The other three went eerily silent. He could feel Naruto's anxiety rise at the confession, but it was Kakashi's bland, "What?" that really got him.

"There was no ceremony for 18th birthdays in the Uchiha clan," as he said it, an intense satisfaction washed over him. He furrowed his brows, smirking back at Kakashi. "I made it up to distract you."

Checkmate. Sasuke had him. That expression on Kakashi's face absolutely priceless. It only lasted for a moment before it was schooled into something harder. "And what, pray tell, were

you distracting me from?"

Letting out a huff of laughter, Sasuke did his best to not look at Naruto, who was sweating profusely. He didn't want to give Kakashi anything close to the truth, for Naruto's sake. Instead, he found joy in having duped his old teacher so well. And he didn't want to tarnish that with the dumb explanation. Cryptically, he kept walking. "Wouldn't you like to know," he said. Then, he vanished.

Or well, he tried to. The portal he spawned was supposed to take him back to the frozen dimension. He needed to get out of that damn village; his skin was sticky and crawling unpleasantly the longer he stayed there. He ached to get away, to do something on his own terms again. But it required immense chakra to jump dimensions, and Sasuke had yet to put too much training into learning to control it. In his haste to snatch the bell from Kakashi's hand, Sasuke accidentally used too much chakra teleporting it. He had used his Rinnegan a lot in the past few hours.

So instead of a wintery blizzard, Sasuke stepped out of his portal to more trees. The same trees. He had only managed to clear a few hundred meters away. Panicked, Sasuke pressed his back into the trunk behind him, looking around frantically to pinpoint where he was and if the other three knew he hadn't gone far.

By the looks of it, they hadn't. Surely Kakashi would have been able to spot the massive amount of chakra that had just occurred? But from the far distance, Sasuke could only assume that the one he left from, which was much closer, had overshadowed the one he appeared in. Sasuke was stuck here; he had to find a way to sneak out without any chakra usage, which shouldn't have been difficult.

He didn't move though. With his superior eyes, he could see his three team members perfectly clearly even this far away. Would their sound carry? None of their lips were moving, seeming to be in an awkward silence. He couldn't be positive about Kakashi, because he was at his back, but he doubted any of them were saying anything. With a pang, Sasuke took in the heartbroken look on Naruto's face, and he swallowed down the emotion thickly. He couldn't look away from it.

Their silence was broken by Sakura, who, surprisingly, sounded livid. It pricked Sasuke's ears to hear her expression. "Kakashi-sensei, we need to talk."

"Oh?" Kakashi responded simply, his hands in his pockets now.

"Yes," she demanded, her arms crossing. "What were you thinking, making him do this game?"

Evidentially, he was itching to explain. "I was thinking that he needs to learn that this is his home, one way or another. And that he needs to stop isolating himself from the people who love him."

"That's not your choice to make!" She was yelling now, and something in Sasuke longed for her. The appreciation he felt was clear and strong. He did harbor a deep love for Sakura- though not in the way she wanted. She was intuitive and stubborn and was always fighting

for him. Clearly, she saw through him better than he ever admitted she did. And that was nice. “Being here is hard for him, and you are making it harder. He should come to it on his own terms.” Despite his rush of affection for her, he squinted at that. He didn’t want to ‘come to it’. Why should he?

Harshly, Kakashi pushed back, “He’s acting like a child, so I’m treating him like a child. He has a habit of pushing people at arm’s length that’s damaging to everyone around him, himself the most. The sooner he gets acclimated back here, the faster he’ll heal.”

“It’s not that simple!” Sakura insisted. “I want Sasuke to come back more than anyone, and I know other people do too, but he has to *want* to come back, otherwise it doesn’t mean anything.”

“Other people don’t want him to come back.” The other two stopped at Naruto’s quiet words. Sasuke himself clenched his jaw at the truth.

“I get that-”

“No, I mean-” Naruto held his hand to silence Sakura’s outburst. “I don’t think you guys can really see how bad it is for him here. I’m still used to it, when people whisper behind your back, or that look of disgust they have when they talk to you, so I picked up on it pretty easy. Earlier today- it took me a second to realize it wasn’t directed at me. And even Shikamaru and them, today were- I mean- come on, we all know the only reason he’s not locked up is because Kakashi-sensei is Hokage.” *And because no one can,* Sasuke thought darkly to himself. The only person who would be able to was Naruto; Naruto was the deciding factor of his freedom. Even with everyone else in the village wanting him locked up, their Great Shinobi Hero was against it, so they didn’t. So much for trying to distract Naruto from noticing the sneers. Of course he picked up on it, regardless. It was stupid of Sasuke to delude himself into thinking he’d be able to do such a thing.

Persistent, Kakashi continued, though he did have the tact to say it as softly as he could. “Listen. I know that Sasuke doesn’t get a warm welcome here. But that’s never going to change if he doesn’t start trying to change it. He knows why people are wary of him.”

“That’s not fair,” Naruto said sternly, those blue eyes filled with his endless energy, passionate and determined. “I spent a decade and a half clawing my way into being accepted. It’s not easy, and it’s not fair. I managed to do it because I *wanted* to be accepted by everyone who hated me. Sasuke doesn’t- or at least, he’s still hurting because of this village who has never apologized to him, so why would he want to bend over backwards trying to win them over?”

Sasuke’s jaw was aching from how hard he was clenching it. “Naruto’s right,” Sakura agreed, her voice gentler now. “How is it fair on him that he has to be the one to fight to be included here when the village hasn’t even pardoned Itachi’s crimes?”

“And no one here even knows his story. His *real* one,” Naruto continued, fists clenched just as hard as Sasuke’s were. “I bet if they did, they’d be a lot more sympathetic toward him. The story was covered up, and everyone was made to think that Uchiha’s are cold and heartless,

when it’s the complete opposite. How can we force him to call this place home after all of that? You know, the Uchiha land hasn’t even been rebuilt since Pain attacked it.”

They were both looking expectantly at Kakashi, and Sasuke wasn’t sure if he was glad or not that he couldn’t see his face from this angle. His whole body felt like it was numb from listening in on this conversation; the only thing he could feel was the prickling sensation behind his eyes- which wasn’t because of the strain of his active Sharingan. He just kept examining Naruto’s face, intense and focused. It was the kind of expression he used to make when he was declaring his future of becoming Hokage to someone who doubted him. It felt truer, though, somehow. And Sakura was even matching him.

Eventually, Kakashi’s shoulders dropped. “Okay,” he caved, piquing Sasuke’s interest. He sounded tired, as he often did. “Message heard. I guess I owe him an apology.” *That* didn’t sound right coming from Kakashi. “I’ll have to write down what I’d like to say, lest I forget it come next year when he finally shows his face here again.” That sounded more like him. Maybe Sasuke *would* disappear for a good six months this time.

As he thought it, Naruto’s expression etched a heavy weight in the pit of his stomach. A weird sensation. He longed for the distance, but at the same time…

What was wrong with him? Sasuke suddenly felt angry with himself, and watching the way Naruto swallowed slowly at Kakashi’s words only made it worse. He turned away, scoffing. But that didn’t stop him from being able to hear Kakashi’s quiet apology. “I’m sorry, guys.” He must have sighed, but that was harder to hear. “Come on. Let’s go get lunch. How about some ramen since it must have been a great tease for Naruto earlier?”

“I’m not hungry.” With that, Sasuke snapped his head around the trunk again, unable to believe the words Naruto had just spoken so dejectedly. Naruto was walking away, hands in his pocket and his back facing where Sasuke was hidden behind his tree. Sakura and Kakashi seemed just as stunned as Sasuke felt, although he doubted they had the debilitating guilt with theirs.

After Naruto left, Kakashi and Sakura eventually padded away, each plagued by their own thoughts. Sasuke didn’t leave his tree for hours.

_o-O-o_

Chapter End Notes

guys i love kakashi a lot ok i need y'all to know we've got like over 100k of this more to go i promise he learns and does better

7

_o-O-o_

After a while, Sasuke wasn't even sure he was thinking anymore. He just sort of pressed his back against the ragged tree and became a fixture of the forest alongside it. Eventually he didn't even feel his guilt. Then he lost sentience. It was hours into the afternoon, probably evening, even though the sun was still up. His birthday was one of the longest days of the year, after all.

His birthday. Sasuke had turned 18. As if that mattered. Nothing else to do, he remembered back when his birthday did matter. His mom and Itachi would bake him a cake that he didn't even like. '*It's too sweet*,' he would tell them every year. But every year they would bake him another one. Sasuke wasn't so naïve to miss the reasons why they would continue to make it; both his mother and Itachi had giant sweet tooths. Sasuke was more excited for the dinner his mother would prepare of that stew with the tomatoes. Still, even though he made a point to complain about the cake every year, he enjoyed the attention he would receive from his brother. The one day a year he knew he could count on for that.

He wished to lose his sentience again instead of remembering them. That last year, the last birthday Sasuke had enjoyed when tensions were high between his father and his brother, they still all sat at the table and laughed and celebrated the day as a family. Sasuke had been able to delude himself that everything had been okay. He was so young. That was a decade ago.

He longed for it. His family. The people he loved. The pain wrenched at his chest with it, numbing everything else. It was easier to focus on the pain than to try to break it. What he would give to never have to feel this again. If he didn't have anyone else in his life to love, he would be free of it.

There it was again: his thoughts circling back as they always did. Kill Naruto. Don't be at risk of this pain ever again. But he couldn't kill Naruto, and it had nothing to do with Naruto's strength. It never did; he had come to realize that a year ago. He wondered how Naruto did it; how he managed to make the love he had for everyone into his strength rather than the weakness Sasuke had always felt from it. Naruto cared, and Naruto protected. It must have been something about the difference in their traumas. Sasuke couldn't pinpoint it.

What he did know was that he didn't want to be away from him for six months. And he didn't want Naruto to be wearing that expression for such a length of time. For any length of time. Especially not because of him. Kakashi and Sakura didn't deserve it, either.

With this realization, Sasuke was at a complete loss as to what to do. Barge into their houses to apologize to them? Ridiculous. The mere thought of him doing such a thing made him nauseous. Write them a letter? Stupid. Don't put that in writing. And then they'd, what? Read it in front of him? Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. No. Barge into their houses and have *them* apologize to *him*?

…Well, that Sasuke could work with.

Standing up felt like he had just warped back into this dimension; except actually travelling between dimensions was less disorienting, he knew. The sun was starting to set. His first place of destination was going to be Kakashi's. After all, he was *most* excited to hear his apology.

Would he be at his apartment by now? He had taken the day off. Though the Sand ninja might have managed to wrangle him and actually tied him to his desk. His nose coiled back at the thought of popping up in the Hokage's office for this with Gaara looming in the background. Hoping Kakashi was home, he attempted there first. He wasn't. So instead he hoped the Sand ninja had retired for the day.

They had. Kakashi was sitting at his desk, mountains of paperwork encircling him. With this, Sasuke concluded that Kakashi was trying to distract himself from the day's events with his work. Seeing him in such a turmoil certainly was satisfying. Not as satisfying as the look on his face when Sasuke materialized in the office in front of him. Or at least, the first few seconds of the first expression was great. Then it morphed into something that made him feel three feet tall. It was intense and made worse by the way Kakashi had stood and crossed the room in just a couple of strides.

Neither Kakashi nor Sasuke were emotional people. They had a mutual respect that they were not to be physically intimate in any form; Sasuke had the sense that what they both liked most about the other was that things never had to be gross and mushy the way other people sometimes required. They both shared the same un-comfortabilities in the regards of emotions, specifically that neither of them were good at the whole touchy-feely aspects. There were very few people Sasuke was okay with touching him in such situations, and they were pretty much all dead now. Kakashi, Sasuke knew and respected, was the same.

Which was why, though it wasn't really something to consider a physical gesture for most people, Sasuke flinched when Kakashi's hand hit his shoulder. In perspective of normal terms, it was as if Kakashi had engulfed him in a hug. It was too weird for Sasuke to put his thoughts into it properly.

To accompany this bizarre gesture, Kakashi looked almost desperately relieved, as if he-well. As if he had been thinking for hours that he was never going to see Sasuke again. His sigh seemed to resonate from every cell in his body. On his shoulder, the hand twitched, its owner probably only just realizing that it was there. As Kakashi's eyes closed, he took in a shaky breath. Sasuke realized what this reminded him of.

He remembered a few of those times from his childhood, when Sasuke would stay out for too late training. There was one time that he missed dinner. He came home to his mother screaming at him; but before he had gotten in trouble, Sasuke remembered the way she had sighed into a bone-crushing hug. His father had clicked his tongue, telling his wife that he knew Sasuke was just out training, but he hadn't been able to hide his own relieved exhale. At the time, Sasuke hadn't thought his punishment being grounded was fair at all: Itachi had been allowed to stay out late training. He had sulked the night away locked up in his room. With Kakashi's hand on his shoulder, now, Sasuke understood.

He didn't realize how much he wished the hand would stay there until Kakashi let it fall, and Sasuke was left feeling like he was floating without its weight. Kakashi seemed to come to his senses. "I- uh. I need to apologize to you," he stuttered.

Trying to regain his own composure, Sasuke said evenly, "Why do you think I'm here?"

Thankfully, Kakashi was laughing. Sasuke felt like he could breathe again. "You could go easy on me, you know!" he pleaded, a coy smile evident on his masked face.

Sasuke rested his arm on his hip defiantly, "When have *you* ever gone easy on *me*?"

"Ah- plenty of times!" Kakashi attempted to redeem himself, but they both knew that was fruitless. "Okay, okay," he conceded, exasperated. He leaned back against his desk, hands on either side of him though holding onto the wood too-tightly, "Sakura and Naruto really put things into perspective for me." With great difficulty, he met Sasuke's eye. "I haven't been fair to you. I didn't let myself see the real reason why coming back here is so hard on you. I guess I, selfishly, just wanted to pretend like it was just a choice you were making. It was easier than admitting that as Hokage, I'm part of the reason you have it so difficult here."

Sasuke's breath caught at the confession. He certainly hadn't been expecting Kakashi to unearth the root of the problem so quickly, and on his own. Neither Naruto nor Sakura had gone so far as addressing that part of the narrative, too fond of their teacher to see that fault. Truthfully, Sasuke hadn't put a great deal of anguish into the subject; but that was because when he thought about it, he couldn't really let himself feel anything. Kakashi had been the reason why he wasn't locked up, why he was allowed to go where he pleased. And at the bottom of it all, he knew Kakashi loved him. But he still had his hatred for those in power across the countries. There were things Kakashi should be fixing, how could he not be fixing?

Clenching his jaw, Sasuke listened carefully as Kakashi continued. "I haven't rebuilt the Uchiha land, yet. I need you to understand that it wasn't because of any ill-will. Truthfully, I just-" as Kakashi lost his words, Sasuke knew why it hadn't been rebuilt yet.

"You don't know what to do with it," he fed him. There was only one Uchiha left, and he barely came to Konoha. What would be the point in rebuilding it?

"I didn't, but I do now," Sasuke's ears perked. "It doesn't make sense to rebuild a whole village subset for people who aren't here anymore. And if we did rebuild it, the empty houses would get taken over by the rest of the village. Which I am quite certain, you would not like," he gave Sasuke a wary smile, who huffed out a spiteful chuckle of agreement in return. "The Uchihas were forced into the outskirts unjustly, but to rob them of all land, even now, would not be right. As far as I am concerned, that land is yours, Sasuke. It doesn't belong to anyone else. Which is why I need your approval on something." He reached behind him, retrieving a stack of papers from on top of his desk. It was what he had been working on before Sasuke interrupted him. He handed them over.

It took him a moment to make sense of the rough blueprints. It was a map of the land that once belonged to the Uchiha clan, but there were only a few buildings sketched out on it. At the top of the largest building were the words *'Uchiha Museum of History'*.

Uchiha Museum of History. Suddenly there was a pounding thumping against Sasuke's chest as Kakashi explained with quiet words. "I was thinking we make a memorial of sorts. Something to commemorate the history of your clan. I want it to be educational. I want everyone in Konoha to be able to visit the museum and learn about the importance of your clan. And the atrocity of its genocide. But I don't want to do anything to that land without your approval. It's your land to decide."

As Kakashi's speech came to a close, Sasuke's vision started to blur dangerously. Judging by another building that was labeled, Kakashi also planned to rebuild the temple that was so important to his people. A museum that told the Uchiha clan's history- its *real* history. Not the one that was doctored by those in charge who murdered them. One where people knew how his brother was manipulated as a child, that he wasn't just a deranged Uchiha who decided to murder his own family without reason. This knowledge- something to commemorate the years of oppression his clan had always faced in Konoha. Sasuke's mind started to drown in his thoughts about it.

It was several long minutes before Sasuke looked up from the papers in his hand. He hadn't even been able to flip to any of the other pages. Seeing how blurry everything around him had gotten, Sasuke realized how close he was to crying. Kakashi was staring at him levelly, though his arms were across his chest as though protecting himself from Sasuke's answer.

He forced himself to look upward and away from his teacher, because he'd be damned if he let that man see him cry from this. Resolutely, Sasuke made certain to swallow multiple times lest his voice crack. "This is… a good idea," he managed to say.

"I was hoping you'd think so," Kakashi said with a raised eyebrow, and Sasuke knew that he was amused by the way Sasuke managed to still wall himself up; this realization only made him feel more embarrassed about it. "I'll finish up the plans and let you look them over." And Sasuke knew, of course he knew, that Kakashi would probably have a lot of fighting to do to get this project to pass with the Elders. But the fact that he didn't bring up how difficult it would be was comforting. He wasn't going to cave on it and create something substandard. Just as Sasuke was starting to breathe normally again, Kakashi added, voice going softer than Sasuke thought was possible for his old teacher, "One more thing, while I have you." He didn't say anything more to explain. Instead, he took the pile of papers from Sasuke's hand, who had to mentally tell himself to unclench his grip around it. Kakashi slid the last paper out from the pile for him. When he handed it over, Sasuke stared at it for what might have been a solid minute.

The first thing he could see was his brother's face. It was his standard ANBU picture, taken maybe a year before that awful day. Sasuke's eyes raked over Itachi's name on the title of the page, probably the only thing about the paper that he was able to register for the majority of the time he was looking at it. Eventually, the words '*pardoned of all crimes'* bounced around in his head enough to make sense. Blots of liquid were hitting the sheet with small noises, a curious thing to be happening.

"I'll make sure it goes through," Kakashi promised.

With this, Sasuke shut his eyes, lashes sticking together. They were soaked. So, it felt, was the rest of his face. He nodded minutely in response. He was able to take a few steadying

breaths again.

When he warily looked up to judge Kakashi's expression, Sasuke found that he was surveying him with a certain unease, despite how he was clearly relieved at Sasuke's reaction. The unease had a specific place that Sasuke knew from firsthand experience. He quickly assured, "We're not going to hug."

"Oh, thank god."

_o-O-o_

Next was Sakura. He spent a good amount of time after leaving the Hokage office calming down. There was a quiet rooftop he was able to sit and process his swirling emotions, setting them each down into their own locked compartment. It wasn't the time for them. If he was going to visit Sakura, he couldn't let himself be too exposed. His goal for the night that he had promised himself was to let the others do the talking, but he knew he would have to start off answering her questions.

Coming in through Naruto's window was always apropos, so he hopped up onto the porch outside Sakura's bedroom. He didn't really want to mingle with her parents at all. As he landed, he had half of a fear that she might be naked, or worse- crying. She wasn't. She was laying in her bed in the dark. It was too early for her to be falling asleep, and she was not under the covers. He knocked on the glass sliding door.

A kunai lodged itself into the pane of the glass, fracturing it all the way to each corner. The glass itself hadn't completely shattered, though shards of it around the kunai's point had showered him. He hadn't flinched at all for it. And he thought to himself, thinking of Naruto, that *this* was how a real ninja should react to a dark figure appearing on their windowsill in the middle of the night.

She looked horrified with herself, though it was of Sasuke's opinion that she shouldn't have been. She rushed over to the door, sliding it open in front of him. "Sasuke-kun! I'm so sorry! You should have come in through the front door! You scared me!" she babbled on.

A panicked voice rang from down the stairs. "Sakura?!"

"I-I'm fine, mom, don't worry about it! I just- dropped my glass of water!" She lied smoothly.

It evidentially worked, because her mother called back, "You've been breaking so many things lately!"

"Sorry, sorry, I'll clean it up!" she assured before slumping her shoulders dramatically, giving a haunted expression at the large pane of shattered glass. "I'm going to really hear it from her if she sees that in the morning…" But her animated demeanor deflated as she took in the fact that Sasuke had come to visit her. Sasuke eyed the way she clasped her hands together in front of her, guarding her chest.

Heat came up into his cheeks, because he knew the types of thoughts that were going through her head. Perhaps he should have skipped Sakura- but no. He shouldn't have. As awkward as she was bound to make this, he did owe it to her to not disappear on her in such a way to make her worry. He was grateful for her. He became even more grateful to her for somehow knowing that she needed to be the one to start the conversation, because Sasuke sure as hell had no way of doing that. "I'm so sorry for today!" she apologized, filled with fervent honesty. "I wish I had figured out what Kakashi-sensei's goal was before we started that game. I don't think what he was trying to do was right. I would have stopped him from making us do that."

Before she worked herself up too much like this, Sasuke calmly attested, "I know you would have." The room was still dark, but it was light enough outside that it wasn't hard to see her eyes shine. Which only made it more difficult for him to not feel nauseous. He needed to break the emotional tension, but he was at a complete loss as to how, and he had things to say that would certainly do the opposite of that. Biting the bullet, he struggled between something both monotone and sincere, "I wanted to thank you. For standing up for me."

He didn't let eye contact happen, lest her vulnerability latch onto him. The wall he had attempted to create in doing so didn't seem to obstruct her. "I've been trying to understand what you went through. It's really hard to think about, but I know it must be even harder for you, who lived it. Naruto, today- he told us that-" she stuttered here, taking a slight step forward, "he said that people were making comments at you. Is that why you kept running everywhere?"

An automatic scoff escaped him. "It was quicker," he downplayed his excuse. "I really don't care either way what the people here say. I just wanted to finish the game." He left hidden that the real truth was that he just hadn't wanted either Naruto or Sakura to notice. Not that it mattered anymore.

"They still shouldn't have said it, even if it doesn't bother you," she defended. "And if I had heard them, I would have told them to shut up." Her arms were now firmly crossed over her front. "They don't know what you went through. They don't know the true story." He chanced a small smile at her for this. The people here didn't know the whole story. He didn't need her fighting his battles with them for him, but it was nice to know that she would if needed.

When she smiled back, he felt her entire being radiating through it, even though it wasn't an exceptionally large one. It was too much for him to deal with, so he broke eye contact again. "I have to leave."

"Wait," she beckoned with an air of desperation, taking several steps further to clutch at his shirt. His pause was wary with her so close. "Naruto and I talked to Kakashi-sensei. He said that he had to apologize to you. If you're up for it, maybe-"

"He already did," Sasuke informed her bluntly. At her tilted head, he continued, "I went to see him first."

The nerves she was feeling seemed to break at that, leaving her in a shaky breath, but something else quickly filled its place. "Oh. Y-You did?" Great. She was formulating a

different assumption about him in her head. Even though she did her best to hide it, Sasuke could tell that she was filling in the blanks with her own sappier version of what really happened. “Wow. I gotta say, I’m kind of jealous! Kakashi-sensei rarely apologizes and actually means it.”

This forced a laugh out of him, short and effective. “No, he doesn’t.”

“What was it like?”

He swallowed hard, wishing that he had gone. The details of his visit with Kakashi were still too fresh in his mind; he knew it was imperative for him to not delve back into the mindset it had put him in. But Sakura had asked that question, wanting to know how it went. He could lie, but it was harder to do that to her now. She would find out about the museum eventually, but for the time being it was something that Sasuke wanted to keep close to him. It was precious, and it was still too soon to be putting so much of his emotional energy into. Anything could happen with it, and while Sasuke trusted Kakashi to do his due diligence, it still needed to be passed by the Elders. If he voiced this to Sakura it would unseal the waterfall in his chest and flood everything around him. So he had to settle by being vague, one shoulder lifting aimlessly, “It was nice.”

Somehow, even with just that, her smile still managed to chip at the seal he was so protectively guarding. It was soft and caring, and Sasuke used to be able to curb his disgust at it with a dismissive scoff, but he no longer could. It was easier when he didn’t care about hurting her feelings. But the fact still remained that he didn’t like the way she looked at him, squinted eyes and tilted head, corners of her lips just barely lifted. Like he was something she treasured within her deepest soul. The thought of it felt like being encaged. “I bet it was!” her voice sounded distant to him. “Do you want to come sit for a bit? I guess I should probably turn the light on. It’s so dark in here!”

“I have to leave,” he repeated himself too quickly.

“Oh,” she deflated slowly. “Right. Thank you for coming to see me tonight.” He hated watching her so tormented, but he hated her lovesick expression more. Nodding, Sasuke pulled the shattered glass door carefully as to not dislodge any shards. As he was about to jump, she asked, “When will you be back in Konoha?”

Next Friday, he didn’t say. “I don’t know.”

Her jaw clenched, just barely visible in the dark room now that Sasuke was more in the moonlight. He could see her struggle to process that, then store it somewhere deep within her. “One more question,” she asked urgently, to which Sasuke had to breathe through his annoyance. “Is there… really no ceremony for 18th birthdays in the Uchiha clan?”

“No,” he stated bluntly. What a stupid question.

“Because I-… hold on…” she cut herself off, giving herself a moment to compose her fluster. Suddenly she was making her way to the other side of the bed, pulling something out from under it. It wasn’t until she brought it over to him that he could register what it was. “I made this for you for it. I couldn’t find anything in the shops, so I had to work on it myself. I really

didn't know what kind you guys used, or if it had to be some type of ceremonial one. When I tell you how much I worried about it," she laughed here, shaking her head of pink hair. "It's actually pretty relieving to know that there wasn't some special ceremonial one that I might have accidentally butchered!"

His throat felt like it was coated in honey, and he couldn't work any of it down. The paper lantern was about the size of his forearm, made of light wooden sticks and paper colored the Uchiha blue. She had cut red and white into the fan insignia and pasted it onto each side. In his mind's eye, he could see her fretting over it, perhaps redoing it over when one of the fans was too big, or not the right color. Worrying that she would accidentally make something offensive, as if that stupid ceremony was actually an important tradition. He then imagined what she would have done with it if he didn't come see her tonight. He didn't think she would have destroyed it or thrown it away. She probably would have kept it for years to come, deluding herself into being happy when she looked at it, as if it wasn't direct reminder of how often Sasuke lied to her.

He accepted the lantern wordlessly, afraid to speak.

"It does make me wonder why you made something like that up, after all of the trouble it seemed for you to talk to us about it," she dared to ask, her voice small as she bit her lip. "You said it was a distraction? From what?"

Fuck. The weight of the paper lantern she had so thoughtfully made with her own two hands was suddenly substantial, to the point where his hand started shaking trying to keep it up. She was looking at him expectantly, waiting for the answer to a question that he could not give. The truth of it- the reason as to why she had wasted hours of her time (days? How long had she taken to make this thing?), the fact that it was all for a stupid plot to see their teacher without a mask on. He worked his jaw open, which caused him actual pain to do. "It was-…" he cut himself off, because he *couldn't* tell her. Even though he knew how fishy any of the other reasons she would probably come up with on her own would be; like he used it to do something illegal right under the Hokage's nose. He couldn't believe he got away with not having to give an answer to Kakashi by some miracle, only to be confronted by Sakura, now.

"It wasn't to hide anything, like…" she trailed off, not wanting to say that she suspected him of doing something traitorous to Konoha.

"*No*," he insisted too loudly. Frustrated, Sasuke gritted his teeth. "Listen. Don't worry about it. Thank you for the lantern."

And with that, he left her.

As he leapt across the town, he berated himself for being unable to come up with anything to get her off of his tail. He couldn't have her curious about this; she would worry, and then what if she voiced her worry to Naruto, who would be unable to stop the truth from coming out? What if Kakashi was there when it happened? He couldn't decide which situation would be better, if Kakashi being there would keep Naruto from talking or not. Yes, maybe that would protect them, with his stupid reaction toward 'pretty people'. His stupid affixation with them. But if Kakashi wasn't there, Sakura would weasel him into speaking, and then she would know and it'd be awful. Though he knew Sakura wouldn't go telling Kakashi unless

he became suspicious that Sasuke was working against Konoha, it was still unsettling for her to find out about it, regardless.

This had gotten out of hand. He wished he could trust Naruto to keep his mouth shut on it, but he knew that was too tall an expectation for him, who was notoriously bad at secrets. Why had he agreed to go along with that stupid plan to begin with? The lantern in his hand felt like it was made of solid metal. What was he going to do with it? Cursing to himself, he decided that he was going to break his rule about not being the active participant in the conversations tonight, because this was all Naruto's fault and the idiot needed to know about it.

Naruto wasn't home.

He stood desolate in Naruto's empty apartment, unsure of what to do. He hadn't counted on Naruto not being home. It was starting to get late; where would he be at this hour? Horror settled deep in Sasuke's stomach. An image of himself flashed in the forefront of his mind, of earlier in the day when he spent nearly- how many hours was it? Eight?- disassociating under a tree. But Naruto couldn't possibly have been plagued by the same clouds. He was too restless for something like that. Naruto could barely sit three minutes in the same seat. No, it was ridiculous to think Sasuke had upset him *that* much. …Right?

No. It was more likely that he was just… taking a walk. That was probably what Naruto would be doing. Just out for a walk. But that thought wasn't much more comforting; that somehow Naruto was so upset to have gone for a walk this late. Perhaps he had been gone for hours, the same clouds Sasuke succumbed to milling around in his head, making him restless instead of stationary.

The guilt in Sasuke's chest began to morph. What was Naruto even upset with him about? That he left? Sasuke always left. Sasuke never promised to stay, and Naruto wasn't so dense as to not realize that. So *what* if Sasuke disappeared for another six months? He didn't owe anyone his presence.

The sudden burst of anger slapped him in the face. He remembered that look Naruto fell to this afternoon all too clearly, the picture etched in his memory thanks to his eyes. He had been hurt. And Sasuke hated seeing it.

Taking several steadying breaths, Sasuke assessed his situation. He was still holding Sakura's lantern. The object somehow radiated a forlorn energy, and it felt heavier now than even before. He set it down on Naruto's nightstand. For some reason he continued to stare at it, unable to place how seeing it by Naruto's bed made him feel. Relieved? That might have been it. He had been drained from holding it.

His eyes then fell on the bed. What was he to do now? He could go out looking for Naruto, but he had seen too much of Konoha that day. Naruto would have to come home eventually. He would wait here for him. The bed called out to him longingly; he was so exhausted. He knew that if he were to lay down, even still in his day clothes, he would be unconscious the minute his head hit Naruto's pillow.

Which was why he didn't lay down. He gave it a wide birth, instead choosing to head into the kitchen. In the sink, the dishes piled from their pancakes that morning, having been left out all day. The sight didn't help him feel better at all. It only made him remember how they woke up, wrapped up in one another. Naruto had been so close, his lips just barely there at that spot that made him feel weak, milliseconds away from starting a dangerous game.

Sasuke longed for it, now. He furrowed his eyebrows at his past self for breaking away so easily. He had used Naruto's growling stomach as an excuse. But he had wanted it in the moment. If Naruto had kept going, what would Sasuke have done?

Resolute, Sasuke began washing the dishes. He flipped the lights on; it would be ridiculous to do them in the dark, and who cared if anyone knew he was here when Naruto wasn't? The only other two he would want to hide it from already knew he was here. And he doubted anyone would be paying that much attention.

Eventually he finished the dishes and carefully put them back in their spots. He knew where they went, now, not that it would be too difficult to figure out. Naruto hadn't accumulated a lot of dishes in his lifetime of cup ramen. The table was dirty, so he washed that too. Domestic stuff took him longer than most people, with his one hand. Sometimes it frustrated him, only mildly, but today he took his time with it. Still, he finished that too and was left with nothing else to do, so he looked around. There were clothes on Naruto's floor, so he put them in the hamper. There wasn't anything else to clean. He could take a bath, but the thought of being in the bath when Naruto came home made him uneasy. That would be awkward.

The bed continued to call to him. He continued to ignore it. He could turn on the television and watch whatever was on it, but Sasuke hadn't watched television since he was a child. Perhaps Naruto had a book somewhere? The thought of rifling through Naruto's drawers was immensely unappealing. Who knew what Sasuke would stumble upon. He shuddered. He would not do that.

So he went back into the kitchen, pulling out a chair to sit at the now spotless table. It wasn't until this moment that he realized that he hadn't eaten anything since the pancakes that morning. He wasn't even hungry. He should get up and cook; that would give him something to do.

But he didn't. Instead he sat at the table, the fog seeping in again.

The door opened suddenly sometime later, startling Sasuke out of his stupor. There was Naruto, finally, crashing into his own home to see Sasuke sitting idly at his kitchen table. And with that, Sasuke felt stupid. He should have gone to bed. "Sasuke…" Naruto trailed, dumbfounded.

It was like the previous night, again. This weird greeting, so un-Naruto-like. Sasuke didn't feel like throwing a kunai at him today. He grunted him return, unable to do anything more.

"Wh-What are you-" he cut himself off, his face screwing up. Sasuke watched it carefully, unsure how it would present itself when Naruto finally settled on an expression. His hand was going white on the door.

Attempting to dislodge whatever emotion Naruto was going to drown him with, Sasuke averted his gaze, asking blandly, “Do you want dinner?”

The question stumped him only for a moment. Then, Naruto was yelling, “What do you *mean* ‘do I want dinner’?! What are you doing here?!”

Sasuke blinked at him, then stood up. The chair screeched against the floor. He didn’t even feel the anger or guilt he knew he should. Scoffing, he attempted to walk past Naruto to leave. “Fine. I’ll go then.”

“Bastard!” The entrance way was too small. Naruto had grabbed him by the shirt, capturing him. Sasuke let it happen without any real reason to. Being this close to Naruto sent a jolt of electricity through him, cracking the walls binding his emotions up. “Don’t just show up here and then leave!”

Sasuke could access his emotions again; the blinding anger rushed in through the splintered wall to fill the void. “Do you want me here or not?!” he yelled, his voice already sounding hoarse from the strain. Distantly he knew that he should keep his voice down, because surely the neighbors could hear every word of it. Probably woke a few up. Whatever. Fuck them.

“That doesn’t matter!” Naruto insisted, clearly also with no regard for the people in the apartments next to him. Sasuke had somehow managed to tap into the life stream of Naruto’s endless emotion. The hand balled in his shirt clenched tighter, pulling him closer. “I thought you weren’t coming back!”

“I did!” Sasuke matched his energy with the two words.

And then suddenly, silence.

A myriad of different expressions lapsed over Naruto’s face as he took in that fact. Sasuke did come back. One throwaway line from Kakashi about Sasuke disappearing for six months and Naruto had immediately assumed it would happen. With each new emotion displayed on Naruto’s face, Sasuke could see deeper into his psyche. He had taken it as truth, his fear of abandonment giving him no other option. Sasuke could see further than what Naruto would be able to process about it; his issues stemming from a childhood of neglect starting on the day he was born. Patching the slots together, everything Sasuke knew about Naruto came into alignment with this realization. How desperately he fought to win Sasuke back for all those years the largest, most glaring piece. The act of Sasuke leaving him was probably… Anger ebbed away, leaving in its wake nothing but his own culpability. Which was stupid. It *wasn’t* Sasuke’s fault that Naruto’s brain was wired this way, no matter what Sasuke had done in the past. But there was still part of him that knew he certainly didn’t help make it easy for him.

Naruto’s fist unclenched, but he did not remove his hand from Sasuke’s chest. It flattened out, resting over the spot in the middle, making Sasuke’s skin burn with its warmth. The parade of expressions on his face finally died down, having passed through the stages of uncertain anger, disbelief, sadness, even a brief moment of something happier. It settled on a rather tired one, his eyebrows pulled down as he painfully apologized. “I’m sorry,” he said through thick discomfort. “I just-” Sasuke noticed the hand on his chest twitch, grabbing his shirt again for the smallest part of a second. “I didn’t think you were coming back.”

The hand fell, and Naruto eyes trailed downward as it did. Sasuke felt cold without it. Without it, his anger started to return, but it had no place anywhere but at himself. “Dumbass,” he said out loud, though he wasn’t sure who it was for. It had gotten Naruto’s attention, and then Sasuke was the one who couldn’t look up. “Let’s eat something,” Sasuke deflected.

A tense moment, and then Naruto’s soft, “Okay.”

They didn’t talk much at first, but after a while of watching as Naruto continued to let the vegetables overcook, Sasuke had to scold him. To which Naruto pouted back that Sasuke should have said something sooner. This was ridiculous, because it was such an obvious thing, and Naruto should know when to take them off the heat by now. After that, talking was an almost subconscious thing for Naruto.

It was nerves, Sasuke could feel. Naruto rambled, and Sasuke easily countered his points in the empty spaces when he second guessed himself. Sasuke didn’t want that. The conversation might have still been a little sore, but it wasn’t difficult to ignore the stilted moments after a while. They stayed on safe topics. Naruto had begun a ridiculous monologue about ramen and what the best types were. Sasuke didn’t care for ramen, much, but he did once have a bowl with a tomato-based broth in a small village in Water that put all others beneath it. Naruto insisted that he once had some just like it, but he couldn’t remember where.

They talked about food, and different villages, and Naruto recounted the many different hot springs he had been in when he was training under Jiraiya. Then he thought fondly back on the ridiculous things his old mentor would do, which Sasuke rolled his eyes at. Still, it was nice conversation, something Sasuke rarely ever experienced. By that point, Naruto had stopped second guessing himself and the atmosphere, finally allowing himself to delve into the normalcy of their usual dynamic. They would have these conversations every breakfast they had together, and in the evenings after their spar and before bed. Or in bed, before the pillows of comfort would pull Sasuke under. He enjoyed them. He enjoyed Naruto. He swallowed down even more guilt that threatened to choke him for almost abandoning him again, choosing to focus back on the conversation.

They were able to talk all throughout their meal easily. While Naruto had a bath, Sasuke washed and dried the dishes; he didn’t want to leave them in the sink again like they had that morning. Naruto came out in his pajamas, toweling off his dripping blond spikes, and then they talked some more, as if the brief interruption apart never happened.

The conversation stayed away from the events of the day, until they migrated to the bedroom where a blue paper lantern sat on top of the night table. Naruto had tilted his head at it. “What’s that?”

Unsettled, Sasuke shrugged a shoulder automatically until he realized that as it had the Uchiha crest on it, it wasn’t something he could really brush off as not his. “That’s the lantern Sakura made.”

“The-? Oh,” it dawned on Naruto all too late. He mellowed substantially from how he had been just a minute earlier, when he was laughing at a dumb joke he had made. “She… made it for you?”

“Y-Yeah,” Sasuke couldn’t stop rubbing his bicep, he found.

He turned back to Sasuke, “You went to go see her?” Sasuke had trouble responding verbally to that, so he hummed. “That was really nice of her…” Naruto trailed off.

Regaining his composure, Sasuke scoffed, “If it wasn’t for the fact that it was for a fake ceremony.”

“Well, she didn’t know,” Naruto shrugged, and then he seemed to shudder. “D-Does she, now? Did you tell her…?”

“*No*,” Sasuke said quickly, making sure to add for good measure, “she doesn’t know why I made up a fake ceremony, and you’re not going to tell her why.”

Naruto jumped slightly at the roundabout accusation. “Why would I tell her that?”

And Sasuke didn’t say out loud that he had already conceptualized the moment Sakura would aimlessly be talking about it to work through her own emotions, and then Naruto would say something that would catch her attention, and then Sakura would press him, and then Naruto would admit to their entire scheme. He knew that possibility was all too probable. But Naruto wouldn’t understand its nuance. “Just don’t,” he pressed.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Naruto mumbled. Sasuke hoped that that was the end of it. He pointedly shut the light off and walked around to his side of the bed to lift the covers back, continuing the motions of ending the night. The bed looked as wonderful and inviting as it always did when Sasuke had a stressful day- which was to say, every day. But then Naruto asked quietly, “Did you go see Kakashi-sensei as well?”

He had been so close to getting into the bed’s comfort. Perhaps it would have made it more bearable to deal with this question. He grunted his response and continued getting into it as if he hadn’t heard the question at all. Sure enough, as he lay on his side against its softness, the mattress drew away the stiffness in his muscles he hadn’t known he was holding. His back was to Naruto, who was still standing at his side of the bed.

“Did it… not go well?” Naruto sounded reserved, a new expression on him.

He supposed his guarded hum had made it sound like it had not been a good visit with their old teacher. But, of course, it had been just the opposite. It had left him raw and open, which was terrifying, hence why he guarded his reaction. Sasuke hadn’t cried like that since after finding out the truth about Itachi. Last time had been for regret and grief, but this time had been something different. Hope? A dangerous thing. Almost as dangerous as love. That was reason enough for Sasuke to be terrified of it. There were so many parts about it that could go wrong. Earlier he had to imprison it all in front of Sakura; it was bad enough that Kakashi had witnessed him processing it. It lay in his mind like a heavy dark knot of twisted confusion. He was happy, but sad, but terrified, but grateful, but angry.

His eyelids already felt heavy; he had held himself back from getting in this bed for too long. But the complicated knot weighed uncomfortably. Naruto was quiet, and Sasuke could read

his own bundle of confusion without even looking at him. And with that, Sasuke realized that he wanted to try something new.

As he set himself to do it, he was met with a blank wall where his script should have been. How did other people do this? This was so stupid. Other people had no problem talking about stuff like this. Did they not find it awkward? And he couldn't help thinking that it made him weak to show himself like this.

But Naruto was the only person Sasuke could ever be okay with seeing the weak side of him. It was strange to reveal that about himself, because he had spent the entire time of knowing him adamantly refusing just that. He always had to be better than Naruto, he couldn't let Naruto know just how close he was to beating him at anything. Sasuke had used that to push himself to train harder; hell, it had been such a huge part of his decision to seek out Orochimaru and leave the village in the first place. Now though? Now Sasuke knew. He knew that Naruto was better than him, and that he always had been. It turns out that Naruto had been able to see his pain all along; just as Sasuke had seen his in return. And now, Sasuke relied on that. It was the only thing that kept him tethered.

It still left the details of how to do this to be sorted, though. Facts- he could work with facts to start. He took a little comfort in how Naruto couldn't see his face, because he had no idea how it was supposed to look to convey what he needed it to. "Kakashi, he…" a small resistance from the knot, and then he managed, "he wants to make a museum."

It had sounded so random when said it like that, but there was nothing to do about it now. Sure enough, Naruto replied, bewildered, "A- what?"

Damn it. And damn his dumb inability to articulate these things. Why couldn't Naruto be more astute and just understand without Sasuke needing to say this shit? "He wants-" Facts. Say the facts. "He showed me some plans he has to rebuild the Uchiha land as a commemorative museum of history. He wants to-" a lump appeared in his throat, which he stubbornly spoke past, "he wants to create a place that will honor us and our history. Our real history."

For a suspiciously long time, Naruto was silent. So long so that Sasuke became too curious, and despite his adamant refusal to turn over and reveal himself, he had to take a peek, because Naruto wasn't giving him any sort of reaction he could work with. Cautiously, he rolled over to his back to see where he was still standing at the side of the bed. Naruto's face was illuminated by a light streaming through the window. He hoped to all gods he didn't believe in that the look on his own face when Kakashi first showed him the plans hadn't been *that* expressive. Sasuke felt small under the wide eyes and slack jaw. "R-Really?" Naruto stuttered, saying something at last.

Naruto's heart was always so easy for Sasuke to read, but actually looking at him solidified it where he hadn't been able to before. He was elated to the point of disbelief, sentimental but still cautious. Why was it so much simpler to unknot Naruto's emotions than his own? He grunted again as a reply, as his script was still yet to be written.

"That's amazing!" Naruto exclaimed, but then he suddenly mellowed. "Are you scared?"

Sasuke flashed his eyes to Naruto, nearly bolting up from the mattress. He didn't, of course, because the mattress was his only respite. "What kind of question is that?!" he demanded, his heart suddenly pounding. *No, he wasn't scared*, he told himself, refusing to acknowledge anything else.

"I-I don't know," Naruto waved awkwardly, trying to laugh it off. "I guess I just kind of felt like you weren't as excited about it as you should be."

"Why would I be excited?" Sasuke spat, unbeknownst to him as to why Naruto was being so dumb about this.

Naruto shrugged. Sasuke wished he would lay down already so they could fall asleep without having to finish this conversation. "I'm excited," he admitted. When Sasuke didn't respond, he explained, "It's what I've wanted for you, but I've never been able to put it into something so concrete. I kind of- I was thinking about talking to Iruka-sensei and seeing if there could be a chapter on the Uchiha clan in the history part of the academy class. But a museum will be so great!"

His confession about wanting to add a subset into the history taught at the academy only added another twisted layer to his knot of emotions. Frustrated by it, he scoffed, "That's *if* it gets made."

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked, his naïveté blaring.

"Do you really think the Elders are going to pass something like that?" Sasuke turned his face upward toward the ceiling, squeezing his eyes shut. "They're the ones who ordered the murder of my clan. Why would they agree to flash that knowledge all over the village?"

The bed was so soft that Sasuke couldn't physically feel the other side of it dip; he could only feel Naruto's presence suddenly get closer. The shock of it had Sasuke facing him again. He had used the bed to lean closer to Sasuke, eyes set strongly into the core of his soul. It was unnerving, yet at the same time, comforting. Then he was promising, "I'll make sure it passes. I'll talk them into it. If they shut their ears, I'll scream it louder. If they go deaf, I'll spray paint it on their front doors. I'll do whatever it takes to get them to listen."

He had just done it. That ability of his to etch destiny with his words. Once Naruto made a promise, there was nothing that could sway against it. The knot in his chest unraveled, disappearing into the abyss without Sasuke getting the chance to analyze the strings that created it. What was there to worry about now that Naruto had made certain the plans would happen?

There was a part of him, of course, that still doubted, despite how he knew that Naruto worked in absolutes. It was a small, fluttering thing in him that he was certain would remain, but he knew it was pointless to dwell on it. It helped, too, that with Naruto getting closer *everything* became less complicated. His eyes, so blue, were burning. His jaw was set firmly, his lips thinner with determination, but still so full…

Sasuke swallowed. He was really, very tired, but Naruto made him feel alight. "Naruto," he called to him, and when Naruto blinked, Sasuke had to break eye contact. "Thank you."

He could tell how affected Naruto was from that, which was why Sasuke was all the more impressed with how he managed to only show it for a moment. Then his demeanor changed, and he was scoffing grandly. “Of the two of us, *you’re* the dumbass,” he sighed dramatically.

Sasuke scoffed, the insult a bit of a surprise for the moment. “Where’s your basis for that?!”

Naruto was finally getting into bed, making a show of trying to look cool and unaffected with the way he crossed his arms under his head, facing the ceiling. “You really didn’t think I would do something like that. It’s like, do you even know me?” This idiot. Sasuke grinded his teeth. The worst part about it was that Sasuke *hadn’t* envisioned Naruto making such a promise on it, which was such a glaringly obvious oversight on his part. The notion must have been locked away, hidden behind that dumb knot.

Needing to release the pent-up aggravation, Sasuke flicked Naruto’s temple hard, enjoying the yelp of pain he received in return. “Go to sleep, dumbass,” he commanded.

“Okay, okay!” Naruto whined, rubbing at the affronted spot. Sasuke turned his cold back to him, choosing to face the wall and end their conversation. It was quiet for a minute, but just as Sasuke had finally sighed into the silence, Naruto interrupted him. “Hey, Sasuke?” his eyebrow twitched, but he grunted a reply anyway. “Happy birthday.”

It was too genuine for Sasuke to brush off. He could feel himself melt further into the bed. “Thanks,” he eventually replied, because there was a nervousness to Naruto that he wanted to subdue.

Then there was a bandaged arm coming around him, resting on top of Sasuke’s. It took a moment for Sasuke’s exhausted brain to process what was happening. A warm body pressed against his, a hot breath at the back of his neck, all coming together to make every cell of his body jolt with electricity. The same electricity he remembered feeling on his lips every time… Sasuke’s eyes had snapped open, but they didn’t help process anything, because he was staring at the wall. Naruto was warm, and holding him, and the mattress under them was soft, and Sasuke was so, so tired. His eyes shut again.

Like this, he remembered the other thing. The other fact that he had to tell Naruto. His body made itself smaller, as if it was trying to absorb itself into the one behind it. “Kakashi’s going to pardon Itachi of his crimes,” he said in absolute, because he knew now. He knew now it *was* an absolute, now that he told Naruto.

After a brief moment, Naruto’s hand clasped over Sasuke’s, where it had been fisted up by his chin. “As he should be,” his voice came, and Sasuke felt each syllable of it against his skin.

Sasuke unclenched his hand and lifted his arm until it was over Naruto’s, switching those positions. He was quick to hold it again, his palm to the back of Naruto’s hand, just as Naruto’s front was against the back of Sasuke’s body. He moved the hands lower until they were flush against his chest, Naruto’s fingers splaying out over it.

And then he fell asleep.

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He stayed until afternoon the next day. They had woken up just as attached as they had fallen asleep, though had adjusted at some point in the night so that Naruto was using Sasuke's chest instead of his pillow. Naruto was awake before him, but he seemed to enjoy dozing the morning away. Sasuke had to groan at him to get off, because it was already too late in the morning for them to waste any more time. All the while he thought to himself how it would only take one brush of Naruto's lips to break that resolve. It didn't come, so they got up.

They spent some time cooking; Naruto wanted pancakes again. Sasuke berated him but made them anyway with the leftover ingredients from the day before. Afterwards Naruto hopped up onto his bed cross-legged facing the TV, which was broadcasting news. Sasuke chose to sit on the floor- he didn't trust himself to not be tempted by the mattress into succumbing to a highly unforgivable nap. When that was over, Naruto asked him if he wanted to train.

He did.

He knew he should have left hours ago. He usually left immediately after breakfast. On the first morning. But, truthfully, he didn't want to. Training with Naruto- that was too intriguing. He had taught Naruto Fire Style, but that was teaching, not training. It was an exciting prospect now that they were both so adept. There was also the issue that whenever Sasuke thought about leaving, that image of Naruto's expression flashed in front of his eyes, cruelly tormenting him. And his words, '*I thought you weren't coming back*'- those harassed him just as bad. So he ignored them and followed Naruto to their field.

"What did you have in mind," Sasuke pried as they worked through some warmup stretches.

Naruto hummed, his brain working through an idea. "Do you remember during the war, how in sync we were?"

Furrowing his brows, Sasuke humored him, suppressing a grin. "Sure," he downplayed, because that was definitely not a feeling he would forget. The pair of them always fought well together, ever since their first real mission in Mist. Coming back as a team after so many years apart had, peculiarly, felt like they had been training together all along.

"We were able to do some pretty cool stuff. Like when you used the Susanoo to armor Kurama's form. And then when you added the Amaterasu to my Rasenshuriken? That was awesome! It kind of felt like…" he studied his hands, then looked up expectantly. "Do you think it's possible for us to fuse our chakras together? Like, more than just combining them. I mean, like, it just always felt to me like our chakras could become completely one *thing* with each other, you know?"

This gave Sasuke pause. To fuse their chakras together- as opposed to simply combining them. To make them come together in a way that made a different form of chakra all together. He didn't think that would be entirely impossible. Surely it had to have been done before, but

it had never been something he put any research into. Why would he? He preferred to work alone. He knew that Orochimaru had tampered with extracted charka and attempted to fuse parts of different samples to create a wholly new substance- or perhaps he might have done it multiple times; for the life of him Sasuke couldn't care to remember if the old creep had actually managed it or not. But the question wasn't whether *anyone* could infuse their chakras, but if they, Naruto and Sasuke, could.

Just as his interest piqued, reality settled with it. "I suppose it's not unthinkable that two people can fuse their chakras into something. But I don't know if it would be wise for the two of us to attempt it or not."

Naruto almost looked affronted, his bottom lip jutting out. "You don't think we'd be able to do it? I think if any two people could, it would be us."

That made him smile for a moment, remembering their bond, but he shook it away. "I meant because of that," he pointed down at Naruto's navel, the physical harbor of his endless, dangerous chakra.

Naruto followed the finger, grinning when he understood. "Don't worry! Kurama's mellowed out in his old age. I was able to give everybody a piece of his chakra during the war without hurting anyone! Besides, you're tough enough to handle it. And you've- you've already seen…" he trailed off, and Sasuke realized where he was heading with that. Yes, he had seen that part of Naruto before, the part that caged the Kyuubi. At the time he didn't let it show, but the immense power of being in that world was overwhelming. He cursed himself. Of course he was strong enough to handle the Kyuubi's chakra. What else were his eyes for?

He sighed, letting his hand rest on his hip. "I suppose we could try it."

"Great!" Naruto chirped. Then he questioned just as brightly, "What did you have in mind?"

Sasuke's confidence fell. This idiot. "You're the one whose idea it was! What did *you* have in mind?"

Cautiously, Naruto bit at his lower lip; it was as if this had been on his mind for quite a while, but he was unsure how to breech the topic, "I guess I always kind of wondered if it was possible when… do you… you know when we…" he was looking down at his arm. His right arm. The synthetic one made with the cells of the First Hokage in place of the one he lost. Yes, Sasuke knew. It was downright impossible to forget.

His eyes fell closed with the pain of remembering it, but he thought about it regardless. That had been some explosion. Even with Sasuke's memory, his eyes always preserving everything for him, it was difficult to make sense of that moment. Both of them screaming, a ball of energy coming at him, his own electric hand coming out to greet it, a flash of light, and then unconsciousness. That explosion was different than any other Sasuke ever witnessed. If that power were to be harnessed… He opened his eyes. "We have to start small. I don't feel like losing my other arm."

Naruto grinned at him.

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Afraid of blowing off any other limbs, they worked with miniscule amounts of chakra, concentrating it in the palms of their hands: Chidori and Rasengan. At first, they started separate and brought them slowly closer together- until they got too close and the mini explosion threw them apart. Stubbornly, they attempted it again and again, until it became clear that this was not the way to harness the power. Instead, Sasuke suggested they try to manifest their jutsus in the same spot.

Which was not supposed to be an excuse to hold Naruto's hand for so long. It really wasn't. In fact, he would have preferred to not have to do that in the broad daylight. Thankfully their bashfulness ebbed when the many explosions kept forcing them apart, and then it became more about staying determined on the task. After a few hours with no progress, Sasuke voiced again that they needed to change tactics.

"I don't think this is something we can work through with physical power," he shook his hand to clear the pain of their last particularly large explosion. The skin was raw and burned, so he handed it over to Naruto, who enacted some of his healing chakra into it. "I'm starting to think this is more of something we need to meditate on together. Maybe we need to work on fusing our chakra signatures first, and then manifesting it with whatever we create."

At this, Naruto slumped, "Not another technique that requires meditating! I hate meditating."

"I think we need to try it." And so they did, sitting down on the hard earth across from each other, the knees of their crossed legs pressed together to keep close. As he went to take Naruto's hand, he eyed the bandage. "Let's try your left hand," he insisted before taking the initiative to grab it.

"-Huh?" Naruto blinked down at their hands.

"It might work better with actual skin contact," he explained.

Naruto hummed. "I guess," he mumbled. "I'm just right-handed."

"That doesn't matter," Sasuke brushed this aside. "Now focus on trying to flow your energy into me, and I'll do the same for you. We'll familiarize ourselves with each other's chakra."

"I'm already familiar with your chakra," Naruto pursed his lips childishly.

"Just do it," Sasuke asserted.

This was better- or at least, there weren't any explosions. If they could start like this, get comfortable with each other's chakra invading their bodies, they'll hopefully be able to control the explosions into something tangible and useful. His hand felt warm, and then the warmth slowly travelled up his arm. He focused on dispensing his own chakra into Naruto and attempting to match the pace so that their flows were equally draining into each other, but Naruto's flow was naturally more abundant. It was nearly impossible to keep up with.

He shouldn't have been so surprised by how soothing it was to be bathed in Naruto's chakra, as it wasn't his first time, but it was perhaps a little concerning just how comfortable he was with it. It was an overwhelming power, sure, but he felt strong and protected, which made him calm. His hand didn't hurt at all, anymore. Then, a layer of the skin near his wrist began to peel from the power surging too quickly, a sensation he hadn't felt since he lost his curse mark.

"Oi," he called attention to it, ripping their hands apart. Naruto was breathing heavily, and Sasuke studied him. He shouldn't be so out of breath like this from meditating. "You're releasing too much chakra at once."

"You're barely giving me any!" Naruto argued in return, flopping down on his back to catch his breath.

Sasuke could still feel the overwhelming power within him. It completely masked his own chakra. "It's probably because of how much more chakra you possess. I can't possibly give you as much as you gave me."

"It's not my fault you have such a limited chakra supply." Sasuke glared at him. As if Sasuke was the abnormal one for having an average amount of chakra. Above average, even.

"Isn't the Rasengan about chakra control?" Sasuke said too loudly, failing to not let his bitterness show. "Use what you know from that to not exert yourself so much." He clicked his tongue, saying more to himself, "You're so inept at control, it's a wonder how you manage to make a Rasengan at all."

That got him motivated. Naruto sat back up straight, clenching his fist in Sasuke's face, "I can control it well enough! I don't know if you've noticed, you bastard, but I've done well with what I can do so far!"

Eyes narrowing, Sasuke couldn't completely deny that. But the fact remained that if Naruto had better control over his gargantuan amount of chakra, he would *actually* be able to stretch it endlessly. Darkly, he took notice in the fact that it was a good thing Naruto didn't, because they would have both died at that last battle of theirs. It was an awful thought that he tried to disperse immediately. "Well you need to get good at it real fast or else this will all be for nothing."

A disgruntled pout on his lips, and it was evident that Naruto couldn't argue against that either. He snatched Sasuke's hand back. "Let's try again."

It was better after that. Naruto surged his chakra into Sasuke an equal amount he received. It eventually became evident that it would be impossible for them to both have an even half of each other's chakra in them; there was no way Sasuke could possibly come up with that fraction even if he completely depleted himself. So Sasuke had an even split and Naruto had the other half of Sasuke's power, which had to have been barely anything. But that didn't seem like the right ratio either. Any way Sasuke looked at it, Naruto's chakra was just too much more powerful. The key was to measure by the power, not the physical amount.

A further issue was that the point of this exercise was to eventually completely merge their chakra signatures, not just combine them. Regardless of the ratio in him, Sasuke could still pinpoint the specific boundaries that separated the two signatures within him. They were two separate chakras, no matter how Sasuke swirled them around.

It came to him after another couple of hours. He opened his eyes to Naruto's serene face still concentrating on his chakra flow. The silence shattered when he voiced, "We need to completely combine both of our chakras together into one place."

He watched the blue eyes flutter open at his voice. "Huh?"

"Think about it," Sasuke explained. "If we manage to fuse our chakras, the issue we've been having will still be there. The correct ratio can only be found if we add our chakras together, and then divide them equally in half. It's simple math, but the problem is that chakra isn't something that's measured with numbers. I don't know the full amount of your chakra, and you don't know mine. But if we sourced all of them in one place, we'll be able to find it."

"Put it… all in one place?" was Naruto's question.

"You."

He blinked for a moment, then leaned forward urgently. "Wait. Why me?"

Grumbling to himself, Sasuke attested that he should have known Naruto would try to argue against this. "Because it's much safer for me to drain myself of chakra than for you," he reminded the jinchuuriki, lest he forget the dangers of being one. "Not to mention how long it would take to deplete you and the Kyuubi of chakra. It would probably take *days*. And it'll be much easier for you to hold mine than it would be for me to attempt to contain all of yours, especially since the Kyuubi's chakra could kill me, theoretically. Besides, my chakra control is better than yours. I'll be able to drain myself down to my last bit a lot safer than you would."

Sasuke had too many points for Naruto to try to refute them all. He stayed pouting at him for a while before needlessly warning, "It's really dangerous to let yourself get so low on chakra."

Deadpanning, Sasuke said in monotone, "Yes, I have graduated the academy." Bottom lip jutting out, Naruto dropped his gaze. A slight flush came to his cheeks, but for the life of him Sasuke couldn't understand why he was acting like this. Still, it made something deep in his chest flutter to see it, so he squeezed his eyes shut. "It'll just be during training. Once we memorize the right ratio, we won't need to do it again."

"…Okay," Naruto mumbled.

But something in that tone didn't sit right with Sasuke. He shook the feeling away, reaching out to grab his hand again and forcing eye contact from him. "Once you have it all, you have to divide it evenly in half. Take your time with it; I don't want you to rush and get it wrong. After that, give the mixture back into me." Unresponsive, Naruto's eyes fell again. Frustration bubbling in him, Sasuke snapped, "What?"

“You’re just…” he answered, sighing in between his sentence. “You’re gunna be really vulnerable.”

Sasuke studied this reaction. It didn’t make sense; he voiced his confusion, “And you’re going to be stronger than you’ve ever been.” This brought the blush back to Naruto’s cheeks. Sasuke could not understand what was going through that blond head. It wasn’t as if Naruto hadn’t seen Sasuke in such a state before; they had nearly both died together last year from being completely drained of chakra and bleeding out. Perhaps he was remembering that? But this was such an opposition to that time. Why would he be getting emotional about that now?

Regardless of Sasuke being able to make sense of it, Naruto had been affected by that sentence. He was smiling through the blush. “Right! Okay,” he finally sounded like his usual self. “Okay, let’s do it!” Settling with the fact that he would just have to live with being unable to decipher this side of Naruto, Sasuke let it go.

It took a while to completely drain himself. He needed to do it slowly, just to be on the safest side he could. His body started to display the effects of exhaustion halfway through: he was sweating, out of breath, and his muscles ached. It was strange to feel like this outside of battle, where adrenaline would make him numb to the discomfort. He could bare it without letting Naruto privy until he was down to about an eighth of his reserves. The slow drain became torturous and difficult to maintain; he wished he could rip into the worst of it like a bandage instead of this drawn-out torment. Here, Naruto began to worry. “Sasuke?”

Apparently, Sasuke had been crushing Naruto’s hand. “I’m fine,” he insisted, keeping his focus on continuing the drain. A second hand rested on his shoulder, and for a moment he felt better again. Even though his body was shaking, Sasuke still pushed his chakra out of him, adamantly concentrating on the hand in his, which was warmer than ever, teasing him with that hot red energy just out of reach.

It wasn’t until he was on his last morsel of chakra that he realized why Naruto had been so embarrassed earlier. He had been planning on telling Naruto when he was done, but it was impossible for him to speak. The exhaustion in him burned; it was a familiar feeling, but he had forgotten its severity over time, and he did not have any adrenaline to numb it. Any attempt to open his eyes was met with large black spots flickering in front of him. He was, as Naruto had stated, vulnerable. And not just any type of vulnerable- he was completely helpless. What kind of idiot was he? He had willingly brought himself into this state because he knew Naruto would protect him.

And Sasuke hadn’t even questioned it. It was trust, this level of blind trust, that had flustered Naruto. Why had it been such a surprise to the other boy? Because to Sasuke, it was the most obvious thing. Naruto was the only person he trusted like this. Naruto had done nothing but prove himself. But as Sasuke quivered, hunched over nearly in his lap, pushing the last fraction of chakra feasible out without killing himself, he was able to recognize just *how* much he trusted Naruto. And that, perhaps, was not only surprising, but what made him feel more vulnerable than being empty of chakra.

Even without the verbal confirmation, Naruto knew when Sasuke was finished. He must have felt the flow cease. It felt like ages for Sasuke, burning down on his last morsel of energy. It

took everything he had to not pass out; Naruto's hand on his shoulder was the only thing keeping him off of the ground.

Then he felt the warmth flow back into him from both points of contact Naruto's hands had on him. The return of chakra made every muscle in Sasuke's body give out, finally able to submit to the weakness he felt. He fell further forward, but Naruto kept him up with the hand on his shoulder. For a while, Sasuke felt greedy for the chakra, as if his body was scorning him for having put it through this torture. Thankfully, Naruto was able to return the flow back into him at a much faster rate than when it was drained.

Small tremors rocked his nervous system at the pleasure of calming his aches. With power returning to him, he was able to sit upright on his own again, though something stopped him from pulling back far enough that Naruto's hold on him would break. He wanted to keep it there, as it too was bringing him that precious energy. He was finally able to focus again on the meditation.

The chakra Naruto had given him only had a fraction of what Sasuke could recognize as his own. Did Naruto really have *that* much more chakra than him? He couldn't fathom it; but then soon after, he could. This was why Naruto was so bad at chakra control. There was no reason to need chakra control with this abundance. Everyone else's supply was a laughable puddle compared to his.

Eventually, Sasuke stopped the flow by letting go of their hands, reaching upward to lift the one off of his shoulder as well. "That's enough," his voice sounded rough, the muscles having only just repaired themselves.

"But- you-" Naruto attempted to insist.

Sasuke shook his head. "This is the amount of chakra that I'm used to having, which means you also have your usual amount. If you give me more, your body will make up for the lost chakra and then the ratio would be off again. It's better for us to keep the same amount we're used to." There was still a crease between Naruto's brows, though. Sasuke shut his eyes, not letting himself feel embarrassed at the glaringly little amount of his own chakra in the ratio. "Focus on the ratio. We need to memorize it so that we don't have to do this again."

After a few good minutes of meditation, Sasuke wondered how this would affect their end goal of a merged substance. Would his amount even make a difference? But they had gotten so far like this, he didn't want to throw this research out. There was still nothing definite that suggested they actually could perfectly fuse their chakras. Frowning, Sasuke attested that he might have to stick his nose into one of Orochimaru's lab, as unpleasant a scenario as that always was.

The silence between them was broken by Naruto's stomach, which voiced its abandonment out to them. Sasuke sighed; they hadn't eaten lunch, and it was getting to the dinner hour. He supposed he should have expected this. Laughing nervously, Naruto rubbed a hand into his blond spikes, "I guess we should-" his eyes shot open, suddenly remembering, "Gaara! I completely forgot we were supposed to get dinner today!"

Right. That. Sasuke's jaw clenched on instinct at the name and Naruto's fluster. They would have to end it here, then. He stood up, masking his annoyance as best as he could. "I'm gunna go do some research on this."

"Are you not gunna get some dinner, too?" Sasuke snapped his head at Naruto's innocent tone. Could he actually be that dense? He was. Naruto was blinking at him, those blue eyes clueless as to how impossible the notion that he and the Kazekage would have dinner together was.

But he didn't have it in him to ruin Naruto's delusion. Gaara was someone very important to Naruto, as much as Sasuke disliked it. "I'll get something quick to eat on the way."

"You're leaving?" the heavy weight of it landed hard at the bottom of his chest. The worst part about it was how Naruto attempted to hide his disappointment afterward. This wasn't something new; usually he would crack a joke. This one seemed to escape from him before he had time to control it, but that didn't stop him from putting on a face.

Swallowing thickly, Sasuke pursed his lips, "I think Orochimaru might have done some research on fusing two separate chakras into one substance. I want to see what he found."

"Oh." Naruto said softly, then pressed, "But you should eat with us before you go-"

"Naruto," Sasuke interrupted quickly before he started rambling. He looked Naruto in the eyes evenly, making sure he was completely focused on him. Sasuke let his eyes say it.

I'll see you on Friday.

Naruto's face fell slowly, the unspoken words taking their time to come into meaning.

_o-O-o_

Sasuke wasn't a fan of letting Orochimaru know that he was snooping around in his labs. While he was sure there wouldn't be a way to go entirely unnoticed, he was hoping to at least get his answers before he was inevitably found out. If he was lucky, maybe he'd be able to keep the subject of what he was looking for a secret as well. The frustrating part was that he knew the quickest way to find what he wanted would be to ask the old creep himself; there wasn't any particularly solid reason why it would be bad if that demented person knew. Sasuke just preferred to not deal with him if he could help it. He didn't have any active desire to kill Orochimaru anymore, but would he prefer it if he *was* dead? Absolutely. Not to mention he would definitely use the opportunity to try to get something from Sasuke in return, and Sasuke was not looking to be trapped in another type of mutual benefit.

Going to Kabuto was out of the question, of course, because telling him would be exactly the same as telling Orochimaru. Orochimaru would probably show up quickest that way, actually. He would need to get to one of the other researchers and threaten them into silence. It would be a hassle, but the outcome would be much more desirable then having to deal with Orochimaru.

At first he didn't think it would matter which researcher he chose for such a task, at least until the first lab coat he saw in the hideout had a familiar head of red hair. Upon seeing her, he almost hightailed it to the next closest lab; it would be another day's journey, but it was almost worth it. His body stopped him, though, forcing him to face the facts that Karin was probably his best asset to help him find the things he needed in secret. He wouldn't need to threaten her, and there wasn't really a chance she would go blabbing to Orochimaru about anything.

And she had mellowed out ever since he almost killed her.

That didn't stop her old habit of stuttering a flustered, "S-Sasuke-kun-!" when he finally let himself be seen to her. He knew that she was aware of his presence, but it wasn't until he remembered that he was holding and entirely different chakra signature that he decided it was better to show himself quickly so that she wouldn't attack. She had been picking herbs in the garden outside of the secret entrance, thankfully alone, and had definitely been plotting something to catch whoever the infiltrator was before Sasuke made himself visible. "W-What are you doing here?! And why is your chakra-"

"I need you to find something for me," he wasted no time exhibiting that this wasn't a casual visit. While she had indeed mellowed out, he knew that she was still bubbling under her surface for him. It was best to squash it at every chance. "A few years ago Orochimaru was working on a project that involved fusing two separate chakra signatures together. I need to know what he found out."

One thing that was good about Karin in this kind of situation was that she didn't ask *why* he needed to know. If he had gone through Orochimaru or Kabuto directly, it would have been their first question, trying to use it to tease him or hold the information over his head until they got something worthwhile in return. Karin, though, had a spark of excitement in her eye. "Did he really? It's probably in the database."

She stood up and headed toward the entrance at once. Sasuke hung back. "I'll wait here," he told her.

"Orochimaru's not here," was all she said to him, giving him a small, tight smirk.

That was good enough for Sasuke. He followed her inside where she led him through the passageways that were designed to be as confusing as possible. This lab in particular was quite foreign to him; he used to choose to stay back if Orochimaru came here. It was the closest to Konoha. Karin knew the way, though, and she scanned her hand on a specific patch of unadorned wall, which opened up at her chakra to reveal a lab. Sasuke knew that it was probably one of the more favored ones, judging by the high level of tech equipment.

The smell was exactly as Sasuke remembered all of Orochimaru's labs to be. It made him antsy, and his instincts screamed at him to activate his Sharingan. He followed them, and everything in the room came into sharper focus. Unaffected, Karin began typing at the large computer. "Oh, Jugo's here," she absentmindedly revealed. This caught Sasuke's attention. "We're only here to work on finding a way for him to control himself a little easier. And Suigetsu's-" she scoffed, an ugly look on her face, "he could be dead. I don't really care." She was so animated. Well, she was an Uzumaki.

As if they had been waiting for their cue, the door opened again. Sasuke had his hand on his sword before he had the time to stop himself. Thankfully it was only the aforementioned Jugo and Suigetsu, so Sasuke was able to force himself to relax, regardless of how exasperated he was to see them. He hadn't planned on a reunion. He was trying to keep this meeting a secret. "Sasuke?!" Suigetsu yelled far too loudly.

"Oi," Sasuke berated him, hoping he would shut up screaming his name for the entire compound to know he was here.

"What are you doing here?!" Suigetsu was still yelling, ensuring Sasuke's headache.

"What's it matter to you why Sasuke is here?" Karin snapped back, because of course she did. He wished she would focus on the computer.

Glaring at her, Suigetsu crossed his arms. "He ghosted us for *months* after the war. Not that I care," he tried to display. "He was always so surly and cold. I was glad to not see him for a while."

"I've been busy," was all Sasuke offered as reason.

"Busy being Konoha's lapdog," Suigetsu mumbled.

Sasuke had his sword drawn instantly, the point of it just at the hallow of Suigetsu's neck. It was satisfying to watch him panic, if only for a moment. "It's none of your business where I've been," he threatened.

Suigetsu's shock only lasted for a moment. He stepped forward into Sasuke's blade, the tip of it piercing into his throat by his own doing. His body turned to water around it and he smiled back at him, unharmed. "Good to see you too, Sasuke."

Right; Sasuke wished that he remembered in the heat of the moment that Suigetsu held no danger at the end of a blade. Well, he would be in danger if Sasuke sent a surge of his electricity through him. But he didn't fancy a fight here, not with Suigetsu- or anyone, really. Too noisy. Orochimaru would know right away. Still, he knew that being pierced in such a way wasn't pleasant for him regardless of how harmless it was, so Sasuke pettily sliced downward through his body. His waterlike form began to melt misshapenly around the cut, though was already molding back into place.

Karin was glaring through her glasses at the other two. "Sasuke and I are busy right now. Stop bothering us."

Shoulder slowly forming back into a solid, Suigetsu lifted it in a shrug. "You're just saying that because you want to be alone with him."

This got Karin to turn around completely, her fist raised threateningly. "S-Stupid! Sasuke asked me to look up something very important for him, and-and I said I'd help! There's no reason for you to be here! You just like to come in here to bother me!"

“Karin,” Sasuke said authoritatively, already exasperated with this group. “Have you found anything yet?” At Sasuke’s scolding, Karin let out a small yelp and turned dutifully back to the computer, clicking away. He could see Suigetsu raring to say something else to her, so Sasuke instead focused on Jugo, who stood silently behind them all. “Jugo,” he called, gaining his attention. “You alright?”

Jugo smiled, “Yes.” Sasuke liked Jugo. “You are too?”

Sasuke grunted a reply, as he didn’t know his actual answer. Annoyed, Suigetsu crossed his arms, glowering at him, “You never ask *me* how *I’m* doing!”

A frustrating accusation. Honestly, what did it matter? Suigetsu was always like this; Sasuke didn’t need to ask him how he was doing, because obviously he was doing fine. “I don’t need to. If you were less annoying, then I’d be worried something was wrong.”

Suigetsu eyed him for a minute, but then a grin came to his lips. He crossed the room, throwing a careless arm over Sasuke’s shoulders, “You put up a bold defense, but it’s okay, Sasuke, I know I’m secretly your favorite.”

“Jugo’s my favorite.”

It was so undeniably the truth that he had to change his tactic. “Well, you like me more than Karin, at least.” She threw a beaker at his head, which splashed his water everywhere as his face exploded.

“Will you stop bothering him?!” She had her fist clenched again. “Sasuke, I think I found what you’re looking for.”

Finally. Sasuke was glad to get out from under Suigetsu’s arm and away from all of the excitement. Karin had pulled up a research file labeled with a serial number. He scanned through the document, chose a specific paragraph and leaned in close to read:

Test subjects’ extracted chakra were not easy to fuse regardless of which two extractions used in combination. However, it is determined that some mix together easier than others; that is to say, usually chakras of the same chakra nature, though that is not always the case. In one instance, the earth and the fire nature mixed better than any two from the same nature. Indeterminate as to why. A hypothesis can be formed that it may have to do with the individual hosts’ will. Awaiting further research into test subjects’ pasts. Fusing process leads almost always to uncontrollable explosions, with the chakras harder to mix being the most irrepressible. On certain occasions, the fused substance-

That was as far as Sasuke could read before the computer screen went black. His hand was back on his blade in an instant, knowing exactly what was coming. Sure enough, Orochimaru’s face popped up in place of the article he had just lost. “Well, Sasuke-kun, what a pleasant surprise.”

Fuck. Sasuke didn’t let go of his blade, managing to keep his expression stony. “I was reading that,” was all he offered as a greeting.

“It’s never a ‘hello’ from you, is it? But yes, that brings me to a peculiar curiosity,” Orochimaru teased, his hands folding on the desk in front of him on the pixilated screen. He looked to be in the southernmost hideout, which was a comforting distance away. Still, Sasuke kept his hand on the hilt of his blade. “*Do* tell me what brings you to my lab today searching up one of my old experiments. It seems you need information on fusing chakras? Why, do I presume, would you need that bit of information?”

It wasn’t difficult to keep his face neutral in Orochimaru’s presence; it was an automatic response, and always had been. Sasuke always knew the dangers of this man. “I’m on a mission,” was all he offered.

“Oh? For our lovely hometown?” Sasuke didn’t respond to this at all. “Well, in that case, I’d be happy to tell you all about it.”

“No thanks,” he declined, already turning around to leave. He had all that he needed: the confirmation that he and Naruto weren’t wasting their time. It *was* possible to fuse chakras. They would be able to figure out how to harness it on their own without Sasuke needing to gravel for the rest of the article.

“Are you sure you don’t want my help?” Orochimaru’s singsong tone sent a shiver down his spine, though it did manage to stop him from getting too far away. “It could benefit you greatly to understand how it’s done, lest you run into its weaknesses blindly. Don’t you want to know how to do it, and more importantly, how it’s undone? It was quite a difficult and risky process,” this had Sasuke pause. That would be useful information. But the idea that Orochimaru would give it to him willingly without anything in return was laughable. Orochimaru caught that Sasuke had found this bit slightly interesting and chuckled darkly. “I’d truly be happy to help, Sasuke-kun. What do you say we-”

“What do you want,” Sasuke deadpanned, unwilling to play his game.

He chucked again, a detestable sound. “Always so brash,” his shoulders shrugged in a mock exasperation, barely hiding his amusement. “Well, I might be able to help you more with it in person, where I’ll be able to see that Rinnegan up close-”

The video stream cut out abruptly due to the fact that Sasuke had sent his lightning infused blade through the camera in the monitor. With just the smallest chakra release, Sasuke’s electricity fried the entire machine and everything attached to it with wires. Karin wailed desperately, “S-Sasuke-kun! I have stuff on that!” as if Sasuke cared at all what research she was conducting on behalf of that old creep. He was done here. It would be impossible now for him to get any more information on this topic. The fact that it was possible for two chakra natures to fuse into a separate substance had to be enough. He and Naruto would be able to figure the process out on their own.

Opening his eyes, which had been closed in an effort to calm himself down, Sasuke continued to leave the room. Just as he was at the door, Orochimaru’s voice slimed its way out of another computer’s speakers, which he must have managed to turn on remotely. “Really, Sasuke-kun, that was quite rude. That computer was expensive, you know.” In response, Sasuke presented a shuriken between his fingers as he turned briskly. He further

activated his Sharingan, his Mangekyou a threat within itself. “My, my, so angry,” Orochimaru sighed, unaffected. He was lucky he wasn’t physically in the room.

Karin wasn’t so unaffected, though, and she waivered with a nervous laugh, “S-Sasuke-kun! Please! I really do have some very important documents backed up on that one!” She had moved herself to be in the direct line of fire of his presented shuriken, waving her hands at him meekly. He squinted harder at her; there was nothing in this world Sasuke cared less about than Orochimaru’s demented research documents. …Well, except for this specific one.

Orochimaru must have been able to surmise as much. “I guess that’s my hands tied,” he sighed again, and Sasuke’s Mangekyou was back on him in an instant. Both of his hands were visible on screen, which was good. “I can’t let my precious research be compromised. I’ll have to give you whatever information that you need to spare having to rely on the backups. So, Sasuke-kun,” he rested his face in his hands, smiling that irksome smile again, “what would you like to know?”

This only made Sasuke more suspicious. If Orochimaru had backups, then obviously this wasn’t about saving his dumb research. Which meant that he was doing this only to get onto Sasuke’s good side- which would never happen. It was likely he was planning on dangling the most important bit of information just out of reach to get Sasuke curious enough to meet in person for the rest. But Sasuke doubted that any bit of information could get him curious enough for that. “You mentioned a weakness,” he chose to start with, hoping he hadn’t just jinxed himself.

He didn’t like the way Orochimaru’s grin became much wider at Sasuke’s compliance. “I did. The perfectly fused combination of two separate chakras is an immensely powerful thing. It’s worth noting that there are a near infinite number of possibilities as to what exactly it creates, because no two chakras are the same, so therefore no two combinations are, either; even two of the same chakras can produce different outcomes depending on the ratio of each. Chakras, when simply combined, can be easily undone, however if a perfect fusion is created then it is impossible to separate them from any outside source. It becomes its own substance entirely. The fusion that it creates at first is always highly erosive and unstable.

“We’ll take your Chidori, for example. You can manipulate the chakra in your body into an electrical state so that it omits from every chakra point in your body without damaging you at all. Now, it took you some time to perfect this without hurting yourself,” Sasuke remembered the burns on his arm when he was first learning to wield the Chidori. “I would hypothesize that if you were to do this- that is to say, immerse it throughout your arm or other chakra points- with a fused chakra that hasn’t been matured yet, well.” He smiled again, “You would completely disintegrate yourself. As the fused chakra is not your chakra anymore, even though you would be able to wield it, it would not distinguish your flesh from anything else it desired to obliterate.”

So it was very important, then, that they not try to fuse the chakra in their bodies anymore. Sasuke was suddenly grateful he chose to stay and listen to this part. “So the weakness would be that the wielder is not immune,” he deduced.

“I have yet to find anyone or anything immune to it,” Orochimaru appraised, his digital face delighted.

Something else had caught Sasuke's ear, "What did you mean 'matured'? You said about fused chakra that hadn't been 'matured'?"

"Ah, well," Orochimaru was back on track, explaining, "It would be more accurate to say that the *fission* of chakra is what is highly corrosive. In order to fuse two separate substances, first you must split the molecules of each substance in order for them to be able to come together in a different way with the other chakra's molecules. Because of this, just as it reaches its initial fusion, there is an undetermined length of time after the molecules split that they are still settling into each other. This is the point when the fusion is unstable and corrosive. That substance's entire purpose is to rip itself apart, and does not hesitate to do the same to anything else that gets in its way. There is a tricky job of needing to lock the molecules together once it is in this state. It creates something most peculiar if you can manage it, even more so than the disintegrative substance of the initial fission."

He stopped there, infuriatingly. "And what is it that it creates?" Sasuke said through a clenched jaw.

"I don't know," he replied. So this was the bit of information he was going to dangle. Damn. It wasn't worth it. Sasuke closed his eyes. "No, as in, I really don't," Orochimaru explained further, peculiarly. Sasuke opened his eyes again. "I've only managed to do it once. In that instance, the chakra produced something very intriguing. It was a healing property that I had never seen before. Sadly, I didn't have much time to work with it. I only had a small sample of those chakra natures- their hosts had unfortunately died, so I couldn't procure more." Darkly, Sasuke surmised who was responsible for their deaths. "The chakra depleted and I had no way to recreate it. But I do think that it was only those two specific chakra signatures that would have made that fusion. I suspect that there might be infinite different variables that would create many different results."

His own brain working around a hypothesis, he temped his luck at getting answers, "And what made those two specific chakra signatures work, but the others fail?"

Orochimaru was wearing that amused look he always reserved for Sasuke, the one that Sasuke detested to be at the end of. "I suppose it had to do with the fact that the hosts had been lovers at one point." Sasuke blanched. Damn it. Orochimaru was studying him, and he couldn't let him see this reaction. He forced his expression to remain still. "It had been completely unbeknownst to me until I decided to look into their past. See, I had collected the both of them in two separate countries at different times. It had appeared as if they were a random pair to test. After some digging, though, I was able to discover that they had been meeting in secret during their childhood and into the adolescence. Their parents forbid it, however, so they had to stop seeing each other. It was a very interesting find. I figure that that must have been why the male had tried to come after me in the first place; he must have learned what happened to the female." Disgusting. Sasuke forced himself to breathe slowly. "I would have used this information to continue the research further, but you see, I had fallen ill shortly after, and then someone killed me."

Yes. Sasuke had. That had been a good day. He was still working through this newest bit of information. He shook the word that Orochimaru had used, the one that had caused him to react, out of his mind. The hosts had to be willing, or perhaps had to have a bond, in order for

the fusion to work- or perhaps just for it to be easier. He and Naruto had a bond. The word floated back in front of him, but he urged it away again. They would be able to bring the fusion into its second stage.

What would they be able to make together?

They wouldn't really need a healing power, as they already had Naruto's chakra. For a moment, he feared them putting so much effort into this mystery box for the jutsu they create to be useless. But who was he kidding? Anything he and Naruto would create was bound to be useful. It was pointless to worry about such a thing.

"You seem to be thinking," Orochimaru slued teasingly. Sasuke flashed his Mangekyou back to the computer screen. "I hope I quenched some of your curiosity. Now I wonder if you would do the same for me." He scoffed the unlikeliness, eyes rolling. This wasn't a give and take. Orochimaru chose to give willingly, but Sasuke was under no obligation to return the favor. That was a misjudgment on Orochimaru's part. Skin itching to be gone of this place, Sasuke set his destination back on the hallway outside, determined to make it there this time. "I didn't think so," Orochimaru conceded in a tone that was far too bright. "Well, do come visit again soon, Sasuke-kun. I look forward to seeing the fruit of yours and Naruto-kun's labor."

Every joint in Sasuke's body went stiff. He cursed himself for having such a visible reaction. Thankfully Sasuke's back was to whatever camera Orochimaru had on him. With gritted teeth, Sasuke grinded his body into working again, continuing his departure. Once out of sight, he was able to hasten his speed down the hallway, following the path he remembered that led to outside.

He could hear Karin calling after him, but he didn't acknowledge her until he was back outside where the walls weren't closing in on him. The crisp air made him realize how nauseous he had felt down there. Karin was out of breath when she reached him, a small item held out in front of her with one hand. "Here," she managed through rough breathing, shaking the object out for him to grab. "You're lucky I keep spare data records stored on jump drives."

It was a flash drive, then. He was impressed that she kept unauthorized personal storage of Orochimaru's work right under his nose. Accepting the drive, Sasuke supposed this earned her a reward. "Thanks," he told her.

She pursed her lips in an attempt to hide her blush, "J-Just do me a favor and return it when you're done. There's more than just that one file on there." He was grateful, so he grunted in an affirmative way. Slipping the small item into his cloak, Sasuke was about to leave when Karin continued, "I suppose this is why you are harboring so much of Naruto's chakra, then."

Right. She was able to sense that. She had met Naruto before, and his was certainly not a chakra signature to forget. Still sheltering the now pointless desire to conceal himself, he didn't respond. He was too angry at himself for somehow being so translucent that Orochimaru was able to read him that easily. It didn't make sense; he had been careful to keep it ambiguous as to whether he was seeking information on this technique to use it or to destroy it. Where had he messed up?

“Well, good luck, Sasuke-kun!” she bid, waving a small hand at him. He was glad for it; she was able to shake him of his thoughts and give him a plain excuse to leave.

Just as he was about to, he heard Suigetsu call bitterly from the entrance of the compound. “Just leave without saying goodbye, then.” Jugo was right behind him, a soft smile on his face.

“Bye,” he said, and then left.

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9

Chapter Notes

> was so excited for y'all to meet my favorite character in this fic that i uploaded early. and the next chapter will be posted today as well, as a treat to everyone who left such wonderful comments! thank you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_o-O-o_

As the week progressed, the reserves of Naruto's chakra in him faded. He was able to conserve a good bit of it by only using his own chakra, but his own eventually started to push Naruto's out naturally. Try as he might to ignore how comforting it was, Sasuke couldn't deny that he liked having it. To ignore this, he focused on the puzzle at hand.

His first deal of business was trying to find another computer to read the rest of that research entry. There weren't any he would have access to in the first several villages. Eventually, he decided to do a bit of breaking and entering on some government official's office to steal the use of their still powered on computer. Well, it wasn't really 'breaking' and entering if he harmlessly switched places with the stapler on the desk. He wanted to return to Naruto with as much information as possible, and he wasn't hurting anything.

Sasuke was glad to have access to the file. It described the combination process that would lead to the first stage of the fusion in a decent amount of detail. He wasn't sure if Naruto would be able to grasp the academia of it, so he spent some time familiarizing himself with the article. It was only necessary for him to read it once, as his Sharingan allowed him to memorize the text fairly well, but learning what the words conveyed took a little bit more concentration.

With the information analyzed, all Sasuke wanted to do was get to training, but there was still a day before he had to leave for Konoha. Despite how dumb it was, he hadn't wanted to deplete Naruto's chakra on training; it had felt too precious, keeping him warm and safe, a little piece of Naruto he could carry around with him. But as he was seeing Naruto on Friday, it was ridiculous to try and conserve it anymore. He trained on concentrating Naruto's chakra in his hand, not unlike how he held the Chidori, though doing what he could to dispense it away from his skin. He kept it contained, now understanding that fusion was something that happened on a molecular level. They had been right to start small.

He would have been lying to himself if he pretended to not be excited about going back to Konoha just this once. It was nice having a new goal of mastering a jutsu. Because of this, he arrived at the village in the premature evening, a lot earlier than usual. The sun was still up.

Anticipating Naruto might be out, Sasuke did a double take on his apartment. The door to his patio was open. That door was never open. Had someone finally broken into his house, forcing entry by his patio door? Stupid of them. The window was always unlocked.

Upon closer inspection, the door was not broken at all. And Naruto was inside, peculiarly sitting on his knees on the floor with his hand stretched out toward his bed, kneeling rigidly. Though he landed silently in the doorway, his presence was felt by the object Naruto was so transfixed on: the other living thing in the room, which had leaped up from the bed and scurried its way onto the floor, bolting right past Sasuke out of the doorway to Naruto's great dismay.

It was a cat. Completely black, its fur long and silky, eyes of a luminous green. "No- AH!" Naruto's sudden scream was at Sasuke's looming form, which he hadn't noticed until then. Sasuke was more concerned with the cat. Though it had zipped urgently past him onto the patio, Sasuke watched it stop at the edge of the leap. Its head turned around to survey Sasuke, its body low to the ground. He knew to avert his eyes, so he faced Naruto again with a raised eyebrow. "W-Wait!" Naruto cried out. "No, don't move!" Sasuke hadn't, but Naruto's inexpert flustering was what spooked the animal into jumping down to the safety of a nearby rooftop. "No!" Naruto wailed, shoulders slumping.

"Why did you have a cat in here," Sasuke asked blandly, as if it was more of a rhetorical statement.

His bottom lip was jutting out, dejected. "If I leave the door open, sometimes he comes in and sleeps on my bed." He let out a frustrated groan, falling to the floor in a dramatic display of his anguish at being rejected. "I had been so close to petting him this time!" Just as quickly as he fell, Naruto propped himself up to glare at Sasuke, "Why did you have to scare him?!"

Clicking his tongue, Sasuke huffed, "You're the one who scared it, dumbass." Out of the corner of his eye, Sasuke could see that the cat hadn't completely left, and was still watching him. As was Naruto, who looked like he didn't believe Sasuke wasn't the reason the cat felt threatened. Sighing, Sasuke sat down right where he stood, just outside of the doorway.

Eyebrows furrowing, Naruto studied him. "What are you doing?"

He was retrieving a small glass bottle from his cloak. "Shut up," Sasuke implored him, using his teeth to help him uncork the bottle. "And don't look directly over here," he instructed through the object in his teeth, managing to shake a few of the pungent leaves onto his hand before plugging the opening back up. It would be too annoying to put it back in his cloak without dropping what was in his hand, so he let it fall in his lap. He used his thumb to rub the leaves on his palm and over his index finger. When he was done, he rested it softly on his knee, crooking the perfumed finger.

Naruto was visibly bewildered by him, a large frown now accompanying the furrowed brows. Sasuke ignored him, sliding his eyelids closed. After several long moments, Naruto finally couldn't stop himself. "Sasuke, you're being weir-" but then he cried out again just as Sasuke felt whiskers tickle his hand. "Wha- how did you do that?!"

Opening his eyes again, Sasuke let himself be smelled. “I told you not to look directly over here,” he warned, because it would be just like Naruto to scare the cat away again. “And stop being so loud.”

“Wh- I-” he growled his frustration, unable to come up with a retort. “Why do you have catnip on you, anyway?” he settled on slewing in an annoyed whisper, arms crossed firmly over his chest.

“In case I need to visit the ninneko,” he answered simply.

“Well it’s cheating!” he complained pointlessly, still thankfully whispering. “I’ve been leaving food out for him for weeks! Why is he- that’s not fair!” The cat had begun rubbing its face against Sasuke’s hand and leg.

Rolling his eyes, Sasuke grabbed the bottle again and put it away as he stood up, quickly removing his shoes to leave at the door and making his way into the room over toward Naruto. “Here. Face this way,” Sasuke tapped Naruto’s left shoulder, motioning him to face the wall so that his body was perpendicular to where the cat was cautiously watching them on the porch. When Naruto was seated, still pouting but now holding an anxious tenseness in his shoulders, Sasuke took hold of Naruto’s left hand. He rubbed the residue that was lingering on him until it was well coated. Then, he fixed Naruto’s fist into a lax position, crooking the top finger for him. “Stay still,” he instructed. Naruto still wasn’t facing the wall like he had told him to, so Sasuke grabbed him by the chin and forced him to turn his attention. “Don’t look away from this direction.”

He watched from against the wall. It was less important for Sasuke to avert his eyes now, but he blinked slowly just in case. It had taken a much longer time before the cat finally caved to the invitation- the hesitation was expected, with how wary the cat knew to be of Naruto’s brashness. Sasuke could tell it was torture for Naruto to sit so still in this situation.

Smirking to himself at the sight of the cat finally sniffing at Naruto’s hand, Sasuke could hardly contain his chuckle. Naruto must have felt the whisker, because his head snapped away from the wall he was supposed to be looking at. He made half of a noise of glee before he caught himself upon seeing the way the cat had jumped backward. His mouth snapped shut, and he determinedly looked back at the wall, a slight pinkness to his cheeks. The damage was already done, though, and the cat began to walk away, body low to the ground. “Dumbass,” Sasuke called him.

He hadn’t completely ruined it; the cat didn’t flee. Instead, it walked a wide arch around Naruto toward Sasuke again, keeping its ears flat to focus on any other dangers the loud human might bring it. It rounded the corner into Naruto’s entryway. Naruto attempted to watch it, seemingly surprised that it was venturing around his house. “Where is he-”

“Leave it,” Sasuke warned.

“But-”

“Leave it,” he repeated. Naruto pouted again, but listened nonetheless. Sasuke walked back to the patio door, shutting it closed and making sure to lock it.

Naruto grumbled, his finger tapping his irritation onto his knee. “Of course you are weirdly good with him. I don’t know why I’m surprised, since he’s named after you and all.”

This made Sasuke frown, unsettled. Calculating a cocked chin toward Naruto, unease brewed in his stomach. “…You named it Sasuke?”

“I named him Teme-chan.” Sasuke froze, his expression falling. There was an involuntary twitch in his eyebrow. He didn’t know if he wanted answers or not, but Naruto was explaining them anyway. “He shows up out of nowhere and steals my bed. Then he just leaves. Also, he’s an asshole. The similarities are endless.”

With this information, Sasuke regretted getting the damn thing acquainted. He could feel a blood vessel threatening to pop in his temple. “Can we go now?” he all but begged before he ended up thinking too far into those comparisons.

“Huh? But-”

“I said to leave it,” Sasuke’s voice was harder than it had been, still for some reason giving Naruto the tools to get the cat to like him. “Cats are about consent. Don’t try to force them into anything, because you can’t.” Naruto still seemed hesitant, so Sasuke tempted him with, “Don’t you want to know what I learned?”

Attention successfully grabbed, Naruto blinked at him in wonder, “You- about the fusion?!”

Tutting, Sasuke left through the window.

_o-O-o_

“So what we trained last week was for nothing?!” Naruto whined at Sasuke’s detailed explanation. “The ratio doesn’t matter?”

“No, the ratio is still important.” he denied, shaking his head. “It’s a good judgement as to how much chakra we each give. It would be dangerous for me if we split the chakra for it down the middle when we’re just figuring it out. It’ll be better for training if we both exerted a proportionate amount, so that we can find a way to fuse our chakras efficiently without wearing me out.”

They were sitting on the ground again in their training field, the sun starting to set. “And um,” by the way Naruto’s voice waivered, Sasuke knew he was going to have to repeat himself. “Can you go over again about the fission part? Like, how we’re supposed to do it?”

Sighing his frustration, Sasuke explained again, “Fusion happens on a molecular level. Even if we were to swirl the molecules of our chakra and completely combine them, the molecules would still be separate, only intermingling together. We have to break the molecules of our own chakras apart and then connect the pieces together with each other’s so they become new molecules altogether. Remember, when the molecules are separate-”

“-Don’t touch it, because it’ll eat us away; yeah, I remember that part,” Naruto waved as if it wasn’t the most important bit of information. “I just don’t really know how we’re supposed

to work with molecules. Aren't molecules, like. Tiny?"

Sasuke deadpanned, blinking slowly. "Well said."

"I mean-" Naruto scoffed at Sasuke's sarcasm. "I get the theory okay enough," Sasuke doubted it, "but actually doing it- is it possible to rip your own chakra apart like that?"

"You can't really rip your own chakra apart by yourself," Sasuke was annoyed to say it, because he had, in fact, said the same thing in his earlier explanation. "We'll be ripping each other's chakra apart. Orochimaru had to use two samples of chakra each time to complete it."

"But how?"

"We'll have to figure it out," Sasuke snapped, his impatience getting the better of him. "If we pool our chakras into the same spot and attempt to solidify it like we do with the Chidori and Rasengan, we can try to create enough friction to-"

"Wait," Naruto interrupted, and Sasuke had half of a mind to start on Naruto's ineptitudes. He stopped after seeing Naruto's expression, though. Something had clicked in that strangely wired brain of his. "Is that what we've been doing all along?" Confusion raked Sasuke for a moment, wondering if Naruto was stupid enough to only just be catching onto the fact that they were trying to fuse their chakras. He continued, "When we- we never found our arms."

This was such a bizarre thing to say. Sasuke blanched, "What?"

"Our arms!" Naruto said loudly. "I thought they just exploded, but now that I think about it, it was kind of more like they…" Disintegrated. Oh. *Oh*. Sasuke was the stupid one. It had been like their arms had disintegrated in that explosion; they never found where they had gone, assuming they simply exploded into tiny fragments. Which, in fact, they had- but on a molecular level. Naruto was laughing. "This'll be easy! We've already done it before! Come on-" He was so flippant about it, grabbing Sasuke by the hand to get it into position. Before Sasuke could catch up with him, Naruto was already dispensing chakra into the space between their palms, procuring a Rasengan, its swirling energy feeling immensely foreboding as it hovered over Sasuke.

"Oi- Wait-" Sasuke pleaded desperately, flinching his hand away from the dangerous power centimeters away from his palm.

Naruto clicked his tongue, whining, "Come on! We can do this!"

"Not so big!" Sasuke scolded. "I only have one hand left!"

Scoffing, Naruto attested, "Fine, but try to get your Chidori in the same spot!"

He didn't like Naruto telling him what to do in this situation, but he wasn't wrong about how they should attempt the fission. His brain was still trying to catch up with the fact that they had *already* managed to reach the first stage of chakra fusion last year when they were attempting to *kill each other*. And now here they sat, willingly trying to recreate it. Perhaps it

was so easy for Naruto to not be so affected by this realization, as he had nothing to feel shame about with it. Sasuke, however, had plenty.

Shoving his emotions down, Sasuke forced himself to focus on his chakra. It wouldn't do to get distracted by them and accidentally hurt Naruto more than he already had in the past. And he didn't want Naruto's hypersensitive empathy to catch onto his awkwardness, because he knew Naruto would start a whole conversation about it and that would be too much. He was glad to have had practiced dispensing his Chidori without letting it touch his skin the previous day; without it, he probably would have hurt himself.

Soon enough Sasuke was able to control his wandering thoughts. This training was too dangerous to not be fully concentrated on it. Especially for him. Naruto's Rasengan was the perfect jutsu for what they were attempting to do, concentrating his chakra into his palm without letting it escape. As much as Sasuke ragged on Naruto for poor chakra control, the Rasengan was every proof of the opposite. The Chidori wasn't designed to be so contained, even when he formed it into the Eisō.

After a few explosions, Sasuke had Naruto go into Sage mode while he activated his Sharingan. They could produce the explosions well enough, but they needed to catch and control the explosions, which was easier to do if they could slow time down a bit. It was several hours later, the only light coming from the nearby streets past the trees, that something happened.

Sasuke was exhausted, but with so many hours of no productivity, he was determined to not leave without making any progress. This was why he was so shocked when the energy between their hands faded its color into something dark, hardly able to tell where it was with how dark the night was. Naruto seemed to be on the same wavelength as him, because they both did nothing but stare at the almost empty space between their hands, taking it slow to recognize that there was definitely chakra there and that no explosion had come.

Naruto let out an exclamation, but Sasuke, panicked, shushed him, "Stop!" If this was what they had aimed for, they couldn't let themselves get reckless in excitement, lest they accidentally destroy themselves with this unstable concoction of theirs. "Get- a stick, or something-" But as Naruto turned to look for something, his hand moved slightly, his concentration wavering. Sasuke watched in slow motion as the mass between their hands swelled, tipping low from the way Naruto's hand jerked when he twisted his body. "*Naruto*!" he yelped, pulling his knees up only just in time before the unstable chakra fell. He watched in horror as the ground just under where his legs had been moments before melted away, leaving a cleanly cut hole.

Thankfully, without Sasuke and Naruto controlling it, the unstable chakra dispersed without damaging anything else. He turned his wild eyes at Naruto, glad they were already activated, hoping to stir the fear deep inside of him. It was satisfying to see that he had. "Y-You told me to get a stick," was all he offered as an excuse for nearly removing another one of Sasuke's limbs.

"I *also* told you how dangerous the first stage is!"

“But we did it!” Naruto yelped, his excitement at them having successfully reached stage one coming back in full force. He pointed down to the hole in the ground between them. “Look! That looks like disintegration if I’ve ever seen it!” He was missing the point that that was almost *Sasuke’s leg*. “Come on, let’s try it one more time!”

Sasuke glared at him, but then he held his hand out again.

_o-O-o_

They had tried it a lot more times than once. By the time they returned to Naruto’s apartment, both of them had managed to discover the distinctions of the molecular fission, determinedly practicing them until they felt comfortable that explosions would be a rare occurrence. It was three in the morning, and they were hungry and exhausted, but the success of their training had them both wired. They were able to produce an extremely powerful jutsu together, and though the jutsu wasn’t in its perfected stage yet, neither of them had any doubt they’d be able to manage it with a few more days of practice.

Sasuke felt boneless as the pair of them landed on Naruto’s porch, made worse by the fact that Naruto had fallen into him. Sasuke nearly fell over when his nerve endings all lit up at the contact, resulting in having to prop himself up on the banister. “I’m so hungry I think I can eat like, five cup ramens,” Naruto said in near bliss, his cheek resting against Sasuke’s shoulder slightly muffling his words.

Sasuke was too tired to argue against cup ramen; he wouldn’t have the energy to make anything else. Instead, he reprimanded, “Open the door, dumbass.” Naruto hummed, seeming content to stand there leaning against Sasuke for another half of an hour. Swallowing thickly, Sasuke couldn’t help agreeing- but it would be much better if they were lying down, so he shoved the other body off of him. Though it had been a light shove, Naruto swayed, and Sasuke had to twist his body to grab him to keep him steady.

When Naruto giggled, Sasuke felt it radiate through him. Naruto was close, and Sasuke was weak. He swallowed thickly, glad that Naruto was looking down to get his key from his hip pack. If Naruto had been looking up…

He forced himself to let go of the other boy, allowing him to unlock his door. When it opened, Naruto pointed in toward his bed, “Oh! Teme-chan!” Sure enough, the cat was curled up on it. It flinched at Naruto’s loud voice, but still stayed rooted on the soft mattress. Sasuke couldn’t blame it. It was a terrific mattress. In fact, he was jealous of it. “I can’t believe he stayed!” Sasuke didn’t have trouble believing it; they hadn’t left an exit open for it to leave.

“You’re going to scare it away again,” Sasuke warned.

Naruto sighed greatly, his shoulders falling, “He’s sleeping on my bed. *I* want to be sleeping on my bed.”

A small smile tugged at Sasuke’s lips. “Dumbass. We have to eat first.”

“Yeah,” Naruto agreed, but he walked like a zombie toward the bed anyway. Amused, Sasuke watched as the cat’s eyes grew large, Naruto stomping closer toward it. Eventually he was too

close, and it shot up from the bed and bolted out of the door right past Sasuke's feet. Naruto didn't seem to notice as he flopped onto his bed face first, not even bothering to lay properly on it with his head on a pillow.

Sasuke slid his eyes closed, shaking his head. "You're going to fall asleep. You need to eat." Naruto's response was muffled in the blankets, but he wasn't sure if they would have been proper words anyway. Still, Naruto's stomach grumbled loudly, accompanied by an anguished groan.

He supposed that meant Sasuke was on cooking duty. He shut the door behind him and twisted the lock, walking around into the kitchen and setting the teapot on. Pulling out two cup ramens at random, Sasuke leaned against the counter as he waited for the water to boil. It made sense why, if they were both equally exhausted, Naruto was completely useless from it. Sasuke was all too familiar with this level of fatigue. His body knew how to work through it.

When the ramen was made, Sasuke wasn't surprised to hear Naruto snoring on his bed. Knowing that he would make himself sick if he didn't eat, Sasuke carefully brought both cups into the bedroom and set them down on the nightstand. He took a moment to watch Naruto's sleeping face, his lips moving slowly in time to his labored breathing. There was a strange notion about them that had Sasuke transfixed, so pink and soft.

To stop himself from staring any longer, Sasuke flicked Naruto on the forehead.

Naruto gave a yelp, thankfully not in such a slumber that it didn't wake him up. His hand came up to rub at the red spot on his forehead just as his bottom lip jutted out at Sasuke. "Jerk," he called him.

Chuckling, Sasuke handed him his cup ramen. "You have to eat something, dumbass," Sasuke nagged. Naruto took the ramen begrudgingly as he sat up, though once he took a bite his resolve seemed to melt. Sasuke left his own on the nightstand, sitting on the bed next to it so that he could eat without balancing the cup on his lap. "You also need to bathe."

At this, Naruto groaned, his mouth too full of ramen, "I'll fall asleep."

He probably would, but the fact remained, "You smell bad."

"Oi!" Naruto yelled, a sudden burst of energy bringing some life back in him. "You smell just as bad!"

"Which is why we need to take baths before bed." Naruto was pouting again, shoveling noodles into his mouth. They were quiet for a little while as they ate. Then, too soon, Naruto fell sideways onto Sasuke's shoulder again. Sasuke flinched, startled by the contact. He noticed that Naruto's cup was empty. "How are you finished already?"

"'Hungry," Naruto mumbled.

He certainly had been. Sasuke still had half of his left, and Naruto leaning against him was making it difficult to continue eating. He was so warm, and all Sasuke would have to do is fall backwards onto this mattress and he'd be unconscious. It was imperative that he shoved

Naruto away again. “Go take a bath,” he instructed. Naruto only fell back into Sasuke’s side, grumbling. “Well I’m not doing it for you!” Sasuke said urgently past the electricity running through him under Naruto’s body.

Though Sasuke had been desperate to get Naruto off of him, the moment he did he felt himself longing for the contact again. It was cold without him. He hadn’t realized that his heart had been pounding until Naruto was stumbling away around the corner. Compelling himself to relax, Sasuke sighed, attempting to shake the feeling away. He was too tired, and when Naruto leaned against him like that…

Thankfully Naruto hadn’t fallen asleep in the bath. After twenty minutes, the bathroom door opened and Naruto meandered out. Sasuke wondered how Naruto knew where he was going, because his eyes were closed. He flopped back onto the bed next to Sasuke, wearing only the towel around his waist. Determined to not look at Naruto in this form, Sasuke took his turn in the bath next, doing his best to scrub the weird feeling off of himself as if it was a physical substance on his skin.

This proved pointless, though, because when he came out it was to see that while Naruto was laying properly on top of the bed now, he had not gotten dressed. And Sasuke knew, logically, that he shouldn’t look. His brain had subconsciously always made him avert his eyes in the past. But for some reason in the moment, whether it was shock, exhaustion, or something else entirely, his eyes stayed transfixed on Naruto’s resting form.

The lights were still on, so Naruto had his one unbandaged arm slung over his face to keep his eyelids cool and dark. Only just visible were his lips, moving just slightly with his small snuffling snores. Further down was his completely bare chest, rising and falling gently. Sasuke remembered how that chest felt when it pressed against his back, to be wrapped in those strong arms. Then his eyes fell lower to Naruto’s belly, which was flat and muscular, all of his training keeping it slim despite the diet of noodles. There was no seal on his stomach anymore, unneeded since he mastered the Kyuubi’s chakra. Sasuke recalled the first time he had seen that mark when they were younger, knowing it was a seal but not what it was for. He remembered, idly, having had trouble looking away from it back then, just as now…

The most troubling part was the towel, which was loose over Naruto’s hips, having dislodged from its tight wrap at some point since Sasuke last left him. Now it was barely holding onto him; if Naruto were to stand up, it would surely fall right off of him. As it was, it looked only by chance that it was still covering him. Even if Naruto were to only lift his leg upright-

It finally became too much. Sasuke dove into the dresser and pulled out the first pair of pajama pants he found, forcefully pelting the fabric directly into Naruto’s peaceful, stupid face. “*Put some clothes on*!” Sasuke yelled, surprising himself with how desperate he sounded.

The idiot yelped himself awake at the assaulting pair of pants. Once he made sense of the situation, Naruto relaxed again, frustratingly falling back onto the pillow, now using the fabric over his eyes to shield the light instead of his arms. “It’s my bed,” his voice was muffled by both cotton and sleep. “’Can be naked if I want to.”

“Not while I’m sleeping next to you!” Sasuke demanded, his heart racing faster the longer he stared at Naruto.

“You’re naked, too,” Naruto countered.

“Wh- I-” Sasuke looked down; he was also only in a towel, but he had a reason. “I just got out of the bath!” Naruto responded with something, but Sasuke couldn’t hear it past the rushing in his ears. This was so stupid. Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose, which helped relieve some of the tension he was feeling. “I’m going back in the bathroom. When I come out, have pants on.” He grabbed the pair of pajamas he always wore and stomped into the bathroom, slamming the door shut.

In the solitude of the bathroom, Sasuke found that he was breathing hard. He couldn’t understand why. Stupid Naruto and his stupid… everything. Out of the corner of his eye he caught his reflection in the bathroom mirror. His face was bright red. No, that couldn’t be possible. It must have been the lighting- Sasuke looked closer, but any way he tried all he could see was his own cherry red face. He brought his hand up to feel it in disbelief, and sure enough it felt hot under his touch. No. This was-

Stop. He stopped himself from thinking anything on it. Whatever-this-was was Naruto’s fault. What was he doing still being naked? There was being tired, but the level of exhaustion he was displaying was downright pathetic. And- rude. Sasuke had all but babied him. Eating, bathing- if it wasn’t for Sasuke, Naruto would have woken up sick and gross. The *least* Naruto could do was put on his own damn clothes.

Finally calming down, Sasuke splashed some water in his face. With a sigh, he was able to compose himself and get himself dressed. It took him twenty seconds. Only twenty fucking seconds to become decent. Naruto’s incompetence was staggering in comparison.

If Sasuke rounded the corner back into the bedroom and Naruto was still naked, he didn’t know what he would do. Leave? He certainly couldn’t sleep next to him if he was like that, no way. But he didn’t think he would leave; his fatigue was unmatched at the moment, and that bed was only meters away. He’d kick Naruto out of it for sure, the fact that it was Naruto’s rightful bed be damned. It would be an actual physical kick, and Naruto would not be able to block it because he was probably already passed out again. Then he would crash to the floor, whining up at Sasuke, all the while being completely…

Thankfully when Sasuke returned, Naruto had managed to wrangle the pants over his hips. Frustratingly he still wasn’t wearing a shirt; apparently Sasuke should have been clearer on the fact that he should have also covered his chest, too. Whatever. It was just his chest. The towel was in a wet heap on the floor, making him roll his eyes at the thought of it growing mold overnight. He threw it over the side of Naruto’s hamper to avoid the smell of it in the morning.

Of course Naruto was already snoring again. Sasuke scoffed as he took in the state of him. Pathetic. He hadn’t even gotten under the covers. As this would be annoying to sleep next to, Sasuke felt no remorse waking him again for what felt like the millionth time in an hour. Tugging on the blanket underneath Naruto’s dead weight, Sasuke grumbled, “Oi. Lift up, dumbass.”

Groaning, Naruto shimmied in a way that allowed Sasuke to wrench the blanket from under him. Once it was freed, Sasuke threw it up over his body, glad to have covered Naruto's bare chest, even though it hadn't bothered him one bit. As Sasuke walked back to the light switch, he heard Naruto mumble softly, "Sasuke…" Sasuke raised an eyebrow, because surely Naruto had fallen back asleep again already. Still, he grunted his reply on the off chance he actually had something to say. Sounding like the dead, Naruto murmured only just audibly, a gentle smile on his lips the only thing visible under the arm he had over his face. "We make a really cool team together."

There was something thick in Sasuke's throat. 'A really cool team' was certainly the simplest way to describe the pair of them. At this point, Sasuke was positive that they were the two strongest shinobi still living. Of course they had help during the war, even after their visit with the Sage of Six Paths, but something told him that once they perfected their fused chakra, even those enemies of the past that they struggled with wouldn't stand a chance. They made 'a really cool team together', indeed. As he thought it, he watched over what little of Naruto's face he could see. He was snoring again. "Are you even awake?" he mused aloud.

"No," Naruto responded.

Laughing to himself, Sasuke shut off the lights and rounded to the other side of the bed, climbing in. He hadn't expected Naruto to latch onto him so suddenly as he did, had expected him to already be entering a REM cycle, but his arms were around him almost instantaneously. As if his body had been waiting for Sasuke's heat the entire time. Sasuke hadn't even been fully settled yet, and it made getting into position that much more difficult. He realized as he felt Naruto's bare chest against his right arm that he really should have insisted on Naruto wearing a shirt.

But he didn't have much time to think about it. He was being dragged into unconsciousness by the comfort of the bed and the warm body encasing him before he could make any sense of Naruto's nudity.

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The morning, however, was a different story. Naruto had his face to Sasuke's chest, cheek pressed against him as if he was trying to merge it into Sasuke' body. Sasuke awoke because Naruto had his right arm wrapped around him, the hand clutching the shirt Sasuke was borrowing up near his armpit, and it had tickled. He had to use what he had of a left arm to shimmy it away from that sensitive spot. In doing so, his eyes flittered open.

Just over the head of blond spikes, Sasuke could see the muscles of Naruto's back. With the other boy so on top of him, Sasuke hadn't realized the blanket was all of the way down by their hips; he hadn't needed it with the extra body heat to keep him pleasantly warm. He had never put any thought into Naruto's back before. What a stupid thing to fixate on. The knobs of his spine, the divots of his shoulder muscles, the dimples just over his tailbone… None of those things were worth staring at. Especially not his own arm, which was resting on top of the smallest part of Naruto's waist, his fingers wrapped around his side.

As Sasuke recognized his own hand, it gripped Naruto's side subconsciously. His skin was soft. The action made Naruto squirm, his side probably sensitive in the way that Sasuke's

underarm was. Naruto's naked chest writhed on top of him, and Sasuke was swallowing thickly. Wishing Naruto would stop, he dragged his hand further up to Naruto's ribcage to get away from that spot on him, which was also a mistake for multiple reasons. One was that the skin was so soft that he wanted to do it again, and two was that it definitely didn't stop Naruto from squirming. As he began to wake, Naruto's hand now over Sasuke's chest was clenching. This wouldn't have been a big issue, except that Naruto's fingers had been right over Sasuke's nipple, and a racing and confusing jolt coursed through him at the sensation.

Naruto, who was oblivious to where his hand was, began to stretch, and Sasuke could recognize just every point of contact the two of them shared. Under the blanket, Naruto's thigh was slung over Sasuke's, and at the base of it-

His face felt like it had caught fire. In his stretching, Naruto's leg on top of him straightened out, their ankles still tangled. It wasn't like Naruto had meant to do it, as he wasn't quite awake, but his hips pushed forward against Sasuke's thigh. Sasuke's mind couldn't even put words to it. All that he could do was turn his head to the wall, fervently trying to ignore whatever was going on under the blankets. Until Naruto's hand unknowingly pinched his nipple again, and Sasuke was forced to reach across and grab it at its wrist, lifting it away from that spot he had never known was so sensitive.

Just beyond the sight of Naruto's hand in his grasp, something else came into focus. Horrorstruck, Sasuke made sense of the blanket just below his hips, which revealed the front of him, where his pajama pants were tenting.

Before Naruto could open his eyes and see, Sasuke vehemently rolled over to his side away from Naruto. He had done it too quickly to be considered natural, and whatever edge of sleep Naruto had been teetering on had shattered. While he was sure he was hidden with the way he curled on his side, he pulled the blanket up to their necks to be certain.

"'Suke?" Naruto mumbled.

Shit. It didn't help at all that Naruto was still pressed completely against him, worst of all their hips, and while Naruto wasn't hard, per say, he definitely wasn't soft against the underside of Sasuke's ass. Panicking, Sasuke spat, "Go make me breakfast, for once."

The change in position didn't deter Naruto at all from still clinging to him, which was becoming more and more of an issue with each passing second. "'M still sleeping," he complained, digging his nose into the sensitive side of Sasuke's neck, his lips brushing at the skin there as he spoke. Sasuke shivered again, even though he had no reason to with how warm he was.

Sasuke was completely fucked. He wanted to be able to get up, head to the kitchen or the bathroom, out of Naruto's presence so that he could calm down. As it was, it'd be too risky for Naruto to not see him. Standing up would mean revealing himself, which he would not do. All he could do was lay as stiff as possible, hoping that Naruto would fall asleep in a way that would let Sasuke sneak out of the bed.

Damn it. Sasuke clenched his teeth together. This *didn't* happen to him. It *shouldn't* happen to him. He hadn't had this issue since he was a child, since before he left the village. Even back

then it was rare, and he had never had this problem in the company of another person before. With Orochimaru he was too repulsed to ever allow himself to be so embarrassing. It was downright impossible in one of his labs. Distantly he knew this was a more frequent problem for other people, but not for Sasuke. Never for Sasuke. Other people were dumb enough to let their bodies become so vulnerable, but not him.

"'R heart's beating fast," Naruto noted, voice muffled against Sasuke's skin.

With a shock, Sasuke realized that Naruto was correct. "No it's not," he insisted, knocking the hand still on his chest off.

"I can still feel it," Naruto mumbled, and yeah, he definitely could with how close they were. Scoffing, Sasuke hid his face further into the pillow. After a moment, Sasuke could feel Naruto prop himself up on his elbow. "Sasuke?"

Sasuke listened for him to continue, but he didn't. Probably because he hadn't made any indication that he had heard him. Frustrated, Sasuke snapped, twisting his upper body so that he could glare at him. "What?"

Naruto pulled back slightly at the sudden anger directed at him. A soft blush appeared across his nose, filling his cheeks with color. His eyes went wide, but he averted them soon after, rubbing the back of his head to ask, "Do you wanna kiss again?"

It was Sasuke's turn to widen his eyes. "What-?!" he could already feel his heart pumping at a dangerous speed. "N- Why would I want that?!"

He lifted a shoulder sheepishly. "'Just kinda got the feeling from you that you wanted to."

Sasuke was practically shaking in his panic. "Wh- Of course I don't, you dumbass!"

But Naruto had squinted his eyes, lips pursed. "See, the way you're reacting only makes me think that you *do* want to."

Sasuke reached behind him at the pillow, sending it smashing into Naruto's dumb face. "Dumbass! Go make breakfast!"

Making a choking sound into the pillow, Naruto clambered to remove it from how it had nearly wrapped around his head at the impact. "Okay, okay!" he caved to Sasuke's relief, rolling over with great difficulty. "But don't expect it to be any good!" And as he got up from the bed, bare back exposed, pajama bottoms hung low on his hips, Sasuke didn't have a response past the gritting of his teeth. The breakfast had *better* be decent with how much Sasuke had taught him so far. The idiot.

Naruto had left the pillow behind for Sasuke to clutch to. His heart was still pounding. Honestly, what had he been thinking? Outright asking of Sasuke wanted to kiss him? What a stupid question. Sasuke did not want to kiss Naruto again, because kissing was pointless. Maybe the other times that they had kissed had been- well. Whatever. Sasuke didn't want to anymore. That was that, he just decided. He did not want to kiss Naruto.

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Chapter End Notes

teme-chan supremacy

i really doubt i have to explain what the cat's name means to any of you, but in case you didn't get it: "teme" is basically "you (derogatory)" in the japanese language. it's usually translated to mean "you bastard!" or something of the sort to signify the rudeness of it, except it's perfectly acceptable to say on children's television (as japan does not have curse words). in the original japanese version, naruto almost exclusively uses the "teme" form of "you" when talking to sasuke. combined with the cutesy honorific "-chan", usually used for children or young women, naruto is basically calling the cat "little bastard" and saying he named it after sasuke.

10

_o-O-o_

Sasuke wanted to kiss Naruto really badly. It took him a while to concede to that.

He had stayed in bed until his *problem* went away, thankfully in time for Naruto to proclaim that the omelets were ready. Sasuke was able to use berating Naruto for overcooking the eggs as a good distraction for a little while, but as they ate, Naruto's bare chest seemed to become more and more of an issue for him to deal with again. Still, he was firmly set on his decision. He would not want to kiss Naruto again.

Then, Naruto dropped the bomb on him. "Oh! I forgot to tell you!" Sasuke blinked, only idly interested, until he said, "I won't be here for another couple of weeks! Kakashi-sensei is letting me go on a mission to Suna!"

This shocked Sasuke's resolve. "What?"

"Yeah!" Naruto exclaimed, the excitement in his voice a troubling thing. "Last week- Gaara-" the name sparked a flame deep inside Sasuke's chest, "-came up with it! He said that he thinks it would be good training for me to shadow him for a bit! And Suna would benefit from having an ally from Konoha hanging around there for a while. Kakashi-sensei agreed that it would be great for me to be seen helping the Kazekage! Honestly, I'm just glad to be able to leave for a bit, you know?"

Sasuke did know. Too well. Naruto was going to Sand for a couple of weeks, which meant Sasuke had no reason to come back to Konoha for a couple of weeks either. Normally, that would be great, but as things were, the image of Naruto spending so long around Gaara… Sasuke was suddenly angry at Kakashi again. But he couldn't let Naruto see into the reason as to why. "Cool," he said, taking another bite of his overcooked omelet.

Undeterred by Sasuke's monotone, Naruto smiled wide, "I know!" He leaned forward onto the table, "You should still come visit, though!"

Flashing his eyes over at him, Sasuke surveyed his sincerity. There was something in it that unlocked a wave of relief- the notion that Sasuke feared he wouldn't be able to see Naruto for a while when he had *just* come to terms with the fact that he enjoyed the weekly visits. With this option in front of him, Sasuke wondered what he would have done without Naruto inviting him. Which was stupid, because he would have been fine without seeing Naruto for a while. No, it had to be that he didn't want to leave Naruto in Gaara's company for so long that left him bitter. Then the image of Gaara's face if Sasuke showed up tempted his mind's eye.

There was no doubt as to why Gaara had invited Naruto to go to Suna for a couple of weeks. It was so painstakingly obvious that it was some weird protection thing to guard Naruto from him. Stupid. As if Naruto wasn't Sasuke's biggest weakness. Or maybe that was it; maybe Gaara planned this as a way to weaken Sasuke by corrupting Naruto into distancing himself.

Well, if that was the case, good luck to him. Sasuke had spent years trying to pry Naruto away from him. It was impossible.

As much as he wanted to villainize the Kazekage, he knew Gaara wasn't unfounded in wanting to separate Naruto from Sasuke. But with the way Naruto was grinning at him, his pink lips stretched, he realized that he had come too far now to let him attempt it.

Which was why he found himself complying with Naruto, giving a falsely noncommitted, "Maybe."

With this looming trip to Suna in the air, Sasuke couldn't stop himself from fidgeting. What did Gaara have in store for Naruto? What exactly was he planning? As Sasuke tried not to stare at Naruto's bare chest, he imagined Gaara… *not* trying to not stare at Naruto's chest.

Which opened a floodgate of stupid thoughts. At the forefront was the memory of Naruto calling Gaara '*pretty'*.

Well. Whatever. Sasuke gritted his teeth, because he and Naruto were heading to their training field again. Was Naruto trying to merge his chakra with *Gaara's*? No. He wasn't. Gaara could stare or not stare at Naruto's chest as much as he wanted; Sasuke was the one who woke up every week with it. In fact, *Sasuke* had all of the right to stare, not Gaara- …not that Sasuke wanted to stare. But he *could*. Had Gaara ever kissed Naruto? No, he hadn't. Gaara didn't get to wake up next to him, didn't get to sit across from him sharing chakra. And as he sat across from Naruto, their knees pressed together, Sasuke couldn't help but focus on the soft pink lips in front of him and think to himself, *'Gaara doesn't know what they feel like'*.

Sasuke did. He knew how soft they were, knew to expect that they'd be even softer than his own memory could recall. He knew the specific color they turn, something just slightly fiercer than their natural color. He knew what that electric charge felt like when they pressed against his skin, into his lips…

And so Sasuke finally comprehended that he did want to kiss Naruto again. Really badly.

It was dumb of him to realize it as they held that unstable, dangerous chakra mixture in their hands. He could have hurt the both of them by being so carelessly distracted. But still as the thought came over him, it was impossible to ignore. Desperate to regain focus on the deadly task in their hands, Sasuke shut his eyes in an attempt to block the sight of those lips. This backfired on him when the darkness allowed different, worse images to flash at him.

Why had he denied Naruto that morning? Perhaps it was something he had to get out of his system; maybe if he had let himself be kissed, he would remember that it was stupid. In fact, he would probably get bored of it soon enough, and then he wouldn't be so plagued anymore at the thought.

In the late afternoon, they agreed that they needed to take a break. There had been no improvement in hours, still stuck with that dangerous, dark, gas-like chakra no matter how hard they attempted to condense it. Neither of them thought there was anything to it other

than to let it sort itself out. Orochimaru's article had said that molecules didn't like being separated and would naturally much rather reconnect.

"Sasuke," Naruto whined, propping himself up back on the hard earth. "Come get ramen with me."

Sasuke, who had been determinedly avoiding looking at the pout on Naruto's lips, scoffed. "It's always ramen with you."

"Because ramen's the best!" Naruto chirped.

"We just had it last night."

"That was cup ramen! It's completely different at Ichiraku's!" While Sasuke didn't want to venture back into the town after last week, he also did not have the energy to cook. And ramen from a shop was indeed a lot better than another cup ramen. But they were *bound* to run into someone…

As he was about to decline for the final time, he made the mistake of looking up. His eyes zoned in on that pout like there was a magnetic charge there. Round and full and pink and soft. Always pink and soft. Clenching his teeth, Sasuke's resolve fell. "Fine," he sighed. Naruto whooped his delight and Sasuke donned his cloak despite the heat of the summer.

The shop was empty when they arrived, a blessing. Naruto greeted the old man behind the counter, who called back affectionately in turn. Sasuke avoided eye contact. Happily taking his seat, Naruto rattled off his order of Tonkatsu ramen with a ridiculous amount of toppings. Just as Sasuke was starting to wonder if the shop owner recognized him or not with his hood up, the old man politely asked, "And for you, Sasuke-san?"

He tried not to blush, saying through a tight jaw, "I don't really care."

Clicking his tongue, Naruto ordered for him, "Make him that miso one with tomatoes. He'll like that."

As much as Sasuke wanted to contradict him, Naruto was right. He *would* like the miso one with tomatoes. Sasuke finally sat down next to him. As the old man worked behind the counter, he struck a conversation Sasuke wished he wouldn't. "I thought I wasn't going to see you for a while. Didn't you say you had a mission in Suna you were supposed to leave for yesterday?"

Sasuke's eyes lifted at that final word. Yesterday? "Oh! I- um…" Naruto sounded suspiciously nervous, rubbing at the back of his head. "I'm not leaving until Monday. Something came up." Just as Sasuke was about to tell himself to lose interest in the conversation, the facts connected in his brain. Naruto was supposed to finally go on a mission, something he had been desperate for since the war settled. But he had postponed leaving until after the weekend. Something about the blush on his cheeks made Sasuke remember that Naruto had no way of communicating with him when he was out of the village.

Humming, the shop owner nodded politely, “We’re certainly going to miss you here! Make sure to give us a visit as soon as you get back.”

“You’re just saying that because you want my money,” Naruto squinted his eyes, but it was evident by his tight smile that he was joking.

“Well, that’s part of it,” the old man joked back. When the noodles were done, he plated them their servings. “Any luck on that other mission you were trying to get Hokage-sama to cave on?”

At this, Naruto snapped his glare toward Sasuke, his pouting at its extreme. “I still haven’t given up on it.”

Upon realizing what mission they were talking about, Sasuke set the chopsticks he was just picking up down. He didn’t know why he was so surprised that Naruto told the Ramen Shop guy about the other dimensions. Naruto probably overshared plenty with this man. “You’re still going on about that?”

“Of course I am!” Naruto said bitterly, waving his own chopsticks around. “It doesn’t make any sense for you to not bring me with you to those other dimensions.”

“We already went over this; you’re not coming,” Sasuke insisted, continuing to stab at his ramen.

For his part, the old man had his hands up, waving them cautiously in front of him. “Sorry, sorry,” he was saying meekly. “I forgot Sasuke-san had been the one so against it. I didn’t mean to dig up a spat between you two!”

Turning to him frantically, Naruto asked, “But don’t you think he’s being ridiculous?”

“Don’t drag me into it!” the old man wisely denied him. Good. Sasuke didn’t have to glower him down, then. “For what it’s worth, I see both sides of the story. But that’s all you’re gunna get from me!” With that, he turned around, making his way to the back of the shop to clean his dishes.

Naruto slurped up his meal huffily. With a full mouth, he pointed his chopsticks at Sasuke, “I’ll get Kakashi-sensei to agree with me, and then you’ll have to take me!” Eyebrow twitching, Sasuke studied him. He finished swallowing, then turned his body to face him, reeking of that confident energy and smiling childishly. “If it’s an order from the Hokage, you can’t say no!”

Frustrated, Sasuke let go of the charade he had formally let Naruto believe in. After all, Kakashi had all but admitted it to him back on Sasuke’s birthday. “Yes, I can.”

“But if the Hokage-”

“Naruto, I’m not-” he stopped himself mid-snap, calming down. He hadn’t exactly wanted to shatter this misconception so blatantly; he had been hoping Naruto would come to it on his

own. Really, Kakashi had already painted it out for him as clearly as should be needed when he admitted that he had no control over Sasuke. “I’m not a Konoha ninja.”

His blue eyes looked exceptionally blank at that, blinking twice before insisting, “What do you mean? You’re taking missions from Konoha-”

“I’m taking missions that I want to for my own moralities, and to prove that I can be trusted,” Sasuke explained in a low voice, hoping that the old man wasn’t listening in on them. “Also to help Kakashi as a personal friend. I don’t *have* to take them. I’m still rouge.”

Wooden, Naruto slowly turned back to his bowl. “But I thought… I fought so hard to bring you back…”

It was like a physical kunai pierced his chest, its metal blade lodging itself right in the middle of his ribcage. Trying to pretend it wasn’t there, Sasuke clicked his tongue, “You *did* bring me back.”

“But you’re still rogue,” Naruto pressed.

“Yes,” he admitted flatly.

“Why?”

That was a harder question to answer than Sasuke could admit. He let his eyelids slide closed, shaking his head. “Naruto, I can’t-” he reset himself, because that angle ran him into an emotional dead end. Facts, he reminded himself. “I still don’t believe in the system this place upholds.”

“So then I didn’t actually bring you back,” Naruto continued to misunderstand.

Emotions swirled and curdled in him, a physical mass blocking his thought process. All that Sasuke could do was reiterate to himself that yes, Naruto *did* bring him back. It was too complicated to be thwarted by the fact that he wasn’t a Konoha ninja, and it wasn’t as simple as Sasuke physically returning to the streets of the town. It was ideals and politics that jumbled Sasuke’s tongue. Because he couldn’t say anything else on it, Sasuke said through gritted teeth, “You *did*. Just… let it go, Naruto.”

He could feel Naruto’s disappointment radiating throughout the small stand, getting condensed into something thick that was hard for Sasuke to breathe through. But he was quiet and didn’t continue to pressure Sasuke into explanation. This, for some reason, was worse. Perhaps he needed Naruto to pressure him, to slowly drain the blockage of emotions he felt. He knew that this would fester between the two of them, now that Naruto was imagining the wrong explanation in the gaps of Sasuke’s silence. As much as Sasuke could see the danger, though, there wasn’t anything he could do to divert it.

“I think what Sasuke-san is trying to say is that you brought him back the hope that things will change for the better. And that he doesn’t have to shoulder the work to do it alone.”

As Sasuke snapped a horrified look at the old man, his face began to fill with heat fast enough to make him worry that it might pop. He was smiling at him so genuinely that Sasuke had to turn away, facing the opposite wall away from the other two, desperate to keep his embarrassment hidden. Stupid. Stupid stupid stupid. His jaw hurt from how badly he was clenching it. His damn- ineptitudes. He wasn't sure if he was angrier at himself for somehow being so easy to read despite his best efforts to keep it hidden, or at being too stupid to read himself when near complete strangers could do it like it was second nature, apparently.

A hand was on his back, and Sasuke was too terrified to turn around. Curiosity got the better of him, though, and he peeked from behind his hunched shoulder. Naruto was grinning at him, his expression still soft, and his lips… Sasuke swallowed thickly, unable to look away. It was a close-mouthed smile. He wished Naruto would say something stupid. "So I did kick your ass hard enough, then!"

There it was. Sasuke could breathe again. He scoffed, thankful for the broken tension. "I kicked yours back just as hard," he still had to retort spitefully.

When they left, Naruto insisted on paying, which was good enough for Sasuke because he couldn't seem to look the old man in the eye anymore.

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The conversation at the ramen shop had left Sasuke feeling quite raw and open. He was indefinitely grateful to that old man for sorting out Sasuke's words for him, even if he found himself continually blushing over the memory. Naruto was in a good mood, a better mood than he had been in even this morning. His stomach squirmed at the idea of what tension would be between them without that intervention. So *this* was the result of being emotionally honest with someone. It was exhilarating and comforting, and Sasuke wondered how often other people managed to achieve this because it was still novel to him. He had experienced it maybe once before at this level, when they were bleeding out together last year, but the effects were certainly better and easier to make sense of when he wasn't suffering from being on death's doorstep.

It did nothing to help the problem of how badly he wanted to kiss Naruto.

They spent the rest of the day training, just as they had in the morning. They were both too focused to realize that Sasuke should have been leaving the village. He couldn't. They were too close to figuring out the merged chakra. And… he didn't want to. He *liked* getting to sit so close to Naruto. He liked working together with him, training their skills, creating a jutsu that only they could do. He liked that their bond seemed to have become even closer. And he liked stealing glances at Naruto's lips.

It was a double-edged sword, though. As pleasant as it was to be hypnotized by the thought of kissing Naruto again, it was also torture. What was Sasuke to do? Lean over and kiss Naruto right there, in the middle of their training? Sasuke would never do something so embarrassing. Even if it was tempting. No, he'd have to wait until later… surely, if they trained into the night, it would be obvious that Sasuke was going to sleep over again. And then… and then…

And then what? And then they would go home, and Sasuke would cook them dinner, and they would take baths, and then they… would go to bed. Where would Sasuke fit in kissing? Before bed, surely. But what if they were too tired, like last night? Naruto would become impossible to work with. And Sasuke, too, would fall victim to that mattress too quickly. It would have to be… maybe… after dinner? But then when would they bathe? How would they be able to stop themselves from what they were doing to take baths? And they would be sweaty, and Sasuke wasn't keen on them kissing each other if they were both so gross.

This was a conundrum. The same problem would arise if they did it before dinner, as well. And doing it here, in the middle of their training- the travel back home would surely be awkward, and so would the rest of the night.

Eventually it was dark for long enough, and their stomachs were growling loud enough, for Sasuke to warrant his anticipation for their training to be over to finally suggest they head home. Naruto wanted to continue training, of course he did, but Sasuke firmly stood by the fact that he didn't want to have to baby him like he had to the previous night. Nor did he want to resort to eating more ramen.

Sasuke was thankful that Naruto had taken to buying groceries on Friday mornings in preparation for the meals they would make together over the weekend. They didn't have to stop by a supermarket, and instead could return to Naruto's home.

They cooked dinner, and Sasuke ensured that he got in the bath first. He couldn't chance letting Naruto go first, because then he would fall asleep before Sasuke got out and be completely useless to him. But then he was left to sit on the mattress, waiting, too afraid to lay down, because he knew what the mattress did to him. He sat on Naruto's side of the bed, leg bouncing despite his best efforts to keep it still. There was nothing to do but wait.

And then Naruto came out of the bathroom, thankfully wearing his pajamas already. He stopped in the entrance of the room for a minute, perplexed by the way Sasuke was sitting on the bed. Slowly shaking his blond spikes into a towel, he blinked at Sasuke, "I expected you to be asleep already."

Sasuke swallowed thickly, trying not to blush. "I was waiting for you."

He realized as he said it that he had never waited like this for him before. What was he doing? Naruto raised an eyebrow, chuckling at him, "Okay," before continuing to towel off his hair.

Feeling stupid, Sasuke moved to his side of the bed, pulling the blanket up over him. This was too awkward. What was he thinking? That he'd be able to- what? Just kiss Naruto out of nowhere? He wrenched his eyes shut, chastising himself. He couldn't do it.

And then Naruto was shutting off the lights and pulling himself into the bed behind him, bidding him a chirpy, "Goodnight!" that was utterly oblivious to Sasuke's turmoil.

It was quiet for a moment, Sasuke wrenching his eyes shut. Then, they burst open. What was he doing? When had Sasuke ever cared about what other people thought? Why did it matter if Naruto knew that Sasuke wanted to kiss him? Sasuke had achieved nearly every goal he set

out on. Why was this one so fucking special? If he wanted to kiss Naruto, then dammit, he was going to.

He sat up to roll over, shoving the blanket out of the way. Naruto barely had time to flutter his eyes open before Sasuke crashed their lips together, determined to do it before he lost the will.

The bolt of electricity was expected, and Sasuke welcomed it, relished in it. He had been hypnotized by the memory of it all day, and finally feeling it again was enlightenment. It ignited every cell in his body. Naruto's lips were, as always, not only just softer than he remembered, but also extra warm from his bath. He needed the kiss to be deeper, so he angled his head and pressed harder, suckling down on the bottom lip between his own. He wished his hand was free to hold Naruto's head into place, but he was using it to prop himself up, which was also important. Remembering how much he enjoyed tasting Naruto, Sasuke dragged his tongue along the lip he had captured.

He hadn't realized how roughly Naruto had been breathing until he managed to push Sasuke upward, and it was evident that he was struggling with it. Concern was the only reason Sasuke stopped kissing him. His ragged breath was startling to listen to, and even in the darkness Sasuke could see that his face was a hot red. "Sasuke," Naruto managed to wheeze, his fist curling painfully around Sasuke's bicep. "You can't just- gunna give me a heart attack-"

His heart certainly was beating at an alarming rate. Sasuke could feel it pounding through both of their ribs. Eyebrows knitting together, Sasuke frowned. "What?"

"What do you mean, '*what'*?!" Naruto was yelling in Sasuke's face, turning his windswept emotions on him. "You just started kissing me out of nowhere and I-" he stopped himself, evidentially needing to slap the hand that had previously been pushing Sasuke back over his lips. Sasuke could feel the heat on the Naruto's face radiating outward over the distance that separated them.

He hadn't come this far to have Naruto suddenly be so weird about it all. "So?" he challenged bitterly.

"So you need to- *warn* me, first, or something!" he flustered, his panicked eyes flittering about. "*God*, Sasuke, you're- you're too pretty to just-"

There was that word again. Sasuke was able to pinpoint what about this reaction seemed so familiar when it shouldn't have been. This was exactly like how he found him in that restaurant's bathroom. All because he couldn't handle '*pretty'* people. What an annoying thing Sasuke had to deal with. What a waste of the courage it took to kiss him in the first place. "Fine," he scoffed, rolling back off of the other body so that his back was against the mattress.

"Wha- No!" Naruto was suddenly floundering, reaching for him again. "I didn't mean for us to stop!"

But Sasuke was too frustrated, trying to coach his embarrassment into submission. “Then quit whining.”

“I just need a second!” Naruto all but growled in response, and then he fell back against the bed again, mumbling, “You really almost gave me a heart attack.” This didn’t dignify a response from Sasuke, so he huffed again, glowering up at the ceiling. All of the turmoil that Naruto had put him through for the entire day, and he couldn’t handle one measly little kiss in return? Pathetic. While Sasuke was distracted with this thought, Naruto had rolled over, a childlike tease to his tone. “I thought you said you didn’t want to kiss me?”

Sasuke froze when he saw Naruto’s smug face. Urgently, Sasuke knew he had to be quick with his explanation, but nothing came. “I don’t-” that was a lie, that was clearly a lie, considering he had just kissed Naruto out of nowhere, he couldn’t go with denial- “You were just-” he was just what? Stupid. Naruto was stupid. “Dumbass-”

He was being smirked at, with lips that were growing wider by the second. “I thought you said that kissing was stupid!”

Of that, Sasuke was certain. “It is!”

“But you want to do it anyway!” Naruto singsonged.

And Sasuke was pissed, pissed that he couldn’t refute that anymore. He sat up so that he could have the upper ground, and so that his arm was free enough to grab Naruto by the front of his shirt, lifting him up to his level. “At least I can actually handle kissing, you loser!”

Naruto clicked his tongue, seemingly unaffected. “No you can’t.”

Eyebrows furrowing, Sasuke doubled down his intensity. “You couldn’t handle three seconds of it, just now!”

“Yeah, but neither can you when I kiss you there.” Sasuke’s eyes went wide at the spot Naruto was pointing toward, that one just under his ear. As he remembered it, his brain was flooded with the memory of how it felt to have Naruto’s tongue run over that spot, the perfect way it made Sasuke’s eyes roll to the back of his head when he sucked. “It’s like your off-switch!”

Sasuke dropped Naruto’s shirt, because he couldn’t refute that, either. He laid back down, curling on his side away from the idiot to sulk. This was stupid. Kissing was stupid. Why had he been so hellbent on kissing Naruto earlier? All for this. Foolish of him to think there was anything worth being so weak over- anything besides this bed, that is, which was pleasantly soft and the only reason why he hadn’t stormed out.

He hadn’t been expecting Naruto’s breath on his neck, nor his hand on his side, which was why he jumped. But then Naruto had whispered close to his skin, “Here, right?” and there was no disputing how badly Sasuke shivered from it. No, he wouldn’t give into it. As much as he tried to resist, the hot breath was hovering right over that spot and Sasuke… Sasuke pushed his shoulder down, stretching the area out, giving the other boy more room.

When Naruto's lips were finally on him, his resolve shattered like the thin veil it apparently was. He didn't *let* himself sigh; it ripped itself out of him despite his better judgment. The more Naruto worked at him, the more he fell boneless, and then Naruto was able to coax Sasuke onto his back. He left a trail of kisses up his neck, under his jaw, on his chin, until finally they were locked at the lips again. Sasuke was relieved that Naruto could last without having a panic attack this time, because he didn't want to stop again.

And they didn't, not for a long time. Sasuke was fighting off sleep, the mattress under him making it difficult, but the electricity of each kiss giving him a jolt of energy to combat it. Naruto's hand had found its way under Sasuke's shirt, and it tickled when he moved it a certain way, but Naruto was placing enough pressure on it to avoid it being unbearable. Instead it became part of the bliss. It was exhilarating to map out Naruto's mouth, to memorize their movements, which ones felt the best. Which ones rewarded him with a delightful groan.

When he wanted Naruto closer, he pulled him in. When he needed a breath, he directed Naruto to return to that spot on his neck. When it became too dangerous to let him continue at that spot, he nosed into his hair to signify to him to come back. It felt like it did when they fought together, both aligned with the same thoughts, bodies moving on instinct. They fought like an intricate dance, like it was an art, and this felt no different.

Then Naruto pulled back after what felt like an eternity. He was breathing rough again, though it was even and not at all worrying considering how breathless Sasuke also felt. "We should- we should stop before… u-unless you…" His voice rang deep, all the way through Sasuke's bones. He didn't want to stop. Why would Naruto suggest stopping? "I-I mean, you know…"

He didn't know. "No…?"

Though it was dark, Sasuke was once again able to tell that Naruto's face went red, but his nerves were more evident by the way he rubbed the back of his head. "I wasn't sure if you-w-we're both kinda hard, right now." Kind of hard? What did he- Sasuke's own face began to radiate. With quick assessment, Sasuke could feel the weight between his legs. When had that happened? And Naruto hadn't- Sasuke couldn't remember a point in which Naruto would have felt him, so how had he known? And for Naruto to just say it so blatantly- "Yeah, I didn't think you'd be too comfortable with that," Naruto was laughing, but not at Sasuke's expense. It did still make Sasuke feel small, at how easily Naruto was able to read him. Laying down on his side beside him, Naruto continued, "But if we kept doing like we had been, it would be torture to stop. Not that it's easy to right now, either," he chuckled.

Naruto hadn't gone far; he still had his arm around Sasuke's chest. Sasuke was still reeling over his own traitorous body. Thankfully, Naruto's hips were far away from his own, not that it made the situation easier to understand. The heavy weight of Naruto's head on his chest kept him rooted.

The thumb of Naruto's hand tapped on the other side of Sasuke's chest. "Sasuke, would you…" Naruto steeled himself as he asked, "would you be opposed to continuing?" Hastily, Naruto added clarification, "I mean- not tonight! Like, in the future, some other time…"

This was such a confusing question, and in Sasuke's stupor he couldn't apply any logical thought to Naruto's meaning. "I don't… know what you mean by that," he admitted, his own vocal tone sounding unrecognizable to himself with how rough it was.

"Continuing!" Naruto repeated uselessly. "Like, you know. Like," Sasuke stared down at him, bewildered at the other boy's floundering. "Like doing something about the fact that we're both hard. Like," thumb continuing to tap on Sasuke's ribs, his voice became more quiet than Sasuke had previously thought he was capable of, "jerking each other off."

For what must have been the millionth time that day, Sasuke's face was going to explode with heat. That was- such a ridiculous question. What kind of question was that? Was that the 'continuation' of kissing, as Naruto put it? That was- sex. That was sex, wasn't it? Sasuke wasn't positive. He had never given sex a second thought before. If it wasn't sex, then jerking each other off was at least a sexual act, and Sasuke had never understood any of those. It was like kissing- what was the point of kissing-?

Sasuke knew the point of kissing, now.

"Sasuke?" Naruto was staring at him because Sasuke hadn't responded. But even with all of the staring, he still didn't have a response. "Uh, I- uh. You can say no, if you don't want to. I just thought that, you know. I've never kissed anyone like that before. Kissing is fun, and you seemed to think so, too, so, y'know. If you wanted to keep going, and all. Like, jerking off is fun. Have you ever jerked off before?"

Finally, something Sasuke could respond to. "No!" he insisted too quickly.

This had Naruto pause. "No…?"

It seemed Naruto's last question had been rhetorical, like he had expected a different obvious answer than the *actual* obvious answer. "No, I haven't done that before!"

After another great, long pause, Naruto exclaimed, "What?!"

Affronted, Sasuke spat, "What do you mean, '*what*'?"

"What do *you* mean you've never jerked off before?!"

"Of course I've never jerked off before!" Sasuke insisted, because honestly, and he barely had the exasperation left to nag himself for using that crude term, which had slipped out of him in his fluster. When would Sasuke have had the time for that? It was stupid, it wasted time, he always had more important things to focus on, there was no way he was doing anything so reckless under Orochimaru's nose. Definitely not under Orochimaru's nose. There were already too many close calls with that old creep; there was absolutely no way Sasuke was going to reveal himself like that, to tempt whatever dangers Orochimaru had signaled would arise. There were many reasons why Sasuke had always kept his blade on him, even when sleeping.

But apparently all of this was a shock for Naruto to discover. His blue eyes were wide, and he seemed to be contemplating something difficult. "Everyone's jerked off before! I mean, I

guess it kind of makes sense that if there was any person who hasn't, it'd be you and all, but still!"

Concerned, Sasuke pressed, "What are you talking about? How would *you* know that everyone's done it before?!"

"We've talked about it! All the guys! Kiba, Shikamaru, Choji, Lee, Shino- everyone!" Naruto explained to Sasuke's horror. He really, really did not want to know anyone else's habits. "It's a normal thing! But *never* ask a girl if they've done it before. They *will* punch you."

He spoke from experience. He was lucky *Sasuke* hadn't punched him for it. Still, Sasuke fell victim to the information as it punctured his psyche. If all those guys did it- no. It was still weird. And it was weird that they all talked to each other about it. How did those conversations even work? Who brings it up? Sasuke was *not* the weird one for having never done it.

But that meant that Naruto did it…

"Wow, I really can't believe you, Sasuke," Naruto was saying. "I guess it would be difficult to have somehow fit it into your life, but still- *never*? You *had* to have found the time! You've never been curious? Or woke up hard? How do you ignore it?"

It was a bit much to answer, but Sasuke managed to stutter, vehemently blocking out the memory of this morning, "I just ignore it and it goes away."

Clicking his tongue, Naruto pouted, "I bet you don't even *get* random erections."

He clenched his jaw, answering, "N-not really."

"Wait!" Naruto suddenly looked up at Sasuke again, pointing his finger, "Why am I jealous of that? Jerking off is great!"

"…Is it?" Sasuke asked, very uncertain.

"It's awesome!" Well, he was definitely sure about that judging by his clenched fist. "You've gotta try it!"

Unnerved, Sasuke shut his eyes, trying to rid himself of this dumb conversation. "It sounds pointless."

Naruto let out a great humph, and Sasuke peeked down at him to see his narrowed glared, "Just like kissing was pointless."

Damn him. Sasuke had no retort to that. Kissing *was* pointless. He still believed that, even if he had to admit it was enjoyable, sometimes. With Naruto. It still didn't amount to anything substantial, and thus was pointless. He sighed, thinking back to how he had felt that morning- even just a few minutes before. When his body had been excited, urging him forward. He hadn't wanted to… 'continue', though, had he? He hadn't strictly known that there was anything to continue on toward. When he had felt Naruto that morning, his entire being had

frozen, but... but what did it matter if Naruto had been hard against him? It was just a body part, wasn't it? Why had he reacted like that?

It wasn't as if Sasuke thought having an erection actually felt *bad* at all. He had just conditioned himself to connect it with danger, and with distraction. It was a distraction to his goals. It was a danger in Orochimaru's labs. But Sasuke's goals were different now- not less dire, but less immediate. And he wasn't in one of Orochimaru's labs anymore. He was in Naruto's apartment, on this safe haven of a bed.

"Sasuke?" Naruto had called his attention again. He blinked down to where he was resting his chin to his chest, unable to make eye contact when he asked, "Do you even have an idea of what it feels like?"

Sasuke swallowed thickly. "You said it feels good."

"You know when I kiss your neck?" he rushed to explain. "It's like that, but. But times ten." Times ten? It was unimaginable that something could feel ten times better than that spot on his neck. "And then when you finish…" Finish. Sasuke knew about orgasms from only an academic standpoint, and it always felt rather theoretical to him. Naruto chuckled, "I can't even explain it. You have to experience it to know."

Sasuke's mouth was starting to go dry. "H-How often do you…"

Thankfully, Naruto didn't need Sasuke's complete sentence. "All the time!" He laughed, as if that admission hadn't completely ruined a whole section of Sasuke's brain. "Honestly, it's kind of addicting. And it's a great way to boost your chakra, did you know that?" He did know, but those were experiments that he would rather forget he knew Orochimaru had conducted. It was never an option for him, he had made that *perfectly* clear back then, and Orochimaru never suggested anything like it again. But Naruto just admitted that he jerked off all of the time. When? And where-

In this bed. Sasuke was suddenly sure of it. That thought was hard to come to terms with. Robotically, his mouth moved the conversation along without him, "Not that you need a chakra boost."

Childishly, Naruto giggled, "Wonder if that's how Kurama got all of his reserves!" Sasuke watched as Naruto's expression went blank for a second, but soon enough he was back to that immature laughing. "He didn't like that I just said that."

Right. Sasuke was lying in bed, talking about masturbation with Naruto, being eavesdropped on by the demon that lived in his stomach. Which meant that the Fox also had witnessed all of the kissing they had just stopped doing. Great. God, what a basket case. Naruto seemed completely unbothered by it; the pair of them were probably too used to each other to care by now. Being vulnerable to Naruto was one thing, but to the Kyuubi? That was much more daunting. But Naruto was Naruto, and he had always had the Kyuubi with him.

Naruto was Naruto. He never changed. Sasuke had never wanted to kiss anyone else before, no one else besides Naruto. Naruto's bed felt good, sleeping in his arms felt good, kissing him felt good; everything new he did with him felt better than the last. Those were facts.

Sasuke could deal with facts. There was an obvious conclusion he could make, if he dared. His body was already responding to the final thought he hadn't let himself have.

It was still new to him, though. And while Sasuke knew the theory, he had only discovered it in passing, and he had always rejected any further research on the topic. And here Naruto was, the safest person to show his vulnerability toward. The *only* person he could be defenseless with. He had… answers, surely from experience, to questions he didn't want to look up in a public library. "H-How do you…," he found himself asking past his embarrassment.

"Well you just kind of… wrap your hand around yourself," Naruto explained, his thumb tapping against Sasuke's chest again. And yeah, Sasuke knew that much. He hadn't meant to ask such an obvious question. He meant something else, but even he couldn't decipher what, exactly. "And then you just- it's kind of self-explanatory, once you start. It's usually better if you use lotion, though."

"Lotion?"

"To make it glide easier," Naruto clarified. "It usually feels better that way for me. It's still really good without it, though. Some of the guys prefer it without. Just so you know, if you want to do it when you're out of the village, or something."

Sasuke didn't want to do it when he was out of the village. He swallowed. "What's the point of it?"

After a moment when Naruto didn't answer, Sasuke looked down to see him chewing on his lip. Eventually, he responded. "You sound like you want to find out."

The hand on Sasuke's chest had splayed out. It was the bandaged one, Naruto's right, because of the way he was lying along the right side of Sasuke's body. It was strange, because Naruto's hand had been on his chest all along, so it didn't make sense that there hadn't been that electricity there a moment ago when it was clenched and tapping. Blue eyes were watching him carefully. The hand moved lower, just a fraction, and Sasuke watched it in wonder.

"Sasuke?" Naruto goaded a response from him, because he hadn't given one.

His entire body was alight from that simple hand, and he longed for it to be lower. Terrified, he made the mistake of looking Naruto in the eyes, then quickly looked away. "I-… If you must…" he managed.

A huff of a laugh escaped through Naruto's nose. "You can just say 'yes'." Sasuke snapped another glare at him, but it lost the power it needed to be effective at another slight movement of Naruto's hand. He was forced to focus on it, because it had traveled lower, over Sasuke's ribs, his abdomen, his belly button. At the waistband of the borrowed pajama pants, Naruto, who was also watching the hand's movement with as much reverence as Sasuke was, told him, "Tell me if you don't like it. Or if you want me to stop."

Sasuke knew as soon as Naruto's fingers brushed against him that he was not going to want Naruto to stop. As much as Sasuke had ignored letting that part of his body make contact with anything else in the past, he was familiar with the feeling, but this was on a completely different level. He had touched himself when he was soft, of course, cleaning and using the bathroom and everything, but when he was hard on those bizarre occasions when his body betrayed him, he had always avoided contact. It was for good reason; he knew, idly, that touching himself like that would feel good, but it was never a luxury he could afford. It was pointless. It was dangerous. It was a distraction. And, honestly, it had never been such a temptation for him before. It was never something that held any of his interest enough to want to go against the warning signs he placed on the concept.

Naruto's hand, though? Was bliss. When it curled around him, Sasuke's entire body buckled. The blanket was down around their thighs from when Sasuke shoved it there earlier, so they were both able to watch. Perhaps Sasuke should have been embarrassed to be so exposed, but it wasn't like they hadn't seen each other's bodies before. They had been to hot springs together when they were kids. He supposed he looked different now, and maybe he should be embarrassed. But if Naruto was going to do this for him, what difference did it make if he watched or not? Maybe it'd be better if he could see what he was doing.

The first pump of Naruto's hand was slow, as if testing the waters. It made him squirm. The fist had enveloped the head of him, working its way down to the base. Sasuke's toes curled when it went back up, Naruto's grip perfectly positioned on him. Every finger making contact, but not tightly. Breathing through his nose, Sasuke let his head hit the pillow for the second pump.

And Naruto kept going, and Sasuke didn't know what to do but clench his hand into the fabric at Naruto's side and try not to completely lose himself. Naruto had begun to move faster, and when he did that the pleasure was almost unbearable. It was impossible to keep himself completely silent, not with the way Naruto's thumb swiped him with every upstroke. It felt best on the underside, where the ribs of Naruto's fingers stimulated beneath the head.

There was something building- the climax. That end part of sex Sasuke knew about from some overheard conversation in his youth, and from some unpleasant experiments he knew went on in those labs. He did his best to not think of them, but try as he might they were the only bits of explanation he could use to make sense of the situation. It wasn't anything like what he had imagined, because he had never had reason to imagine it. He didn't know what to expect at all; even Naruto said he couldn't explain it, that it was something Sasuke had to experience to understand. He knew the basics, the facts. He knew to expect semen. Somehow it always seemed like that was a substance everyone else had except him. Like somehow his body didn't produce it like others' did.

The more Naruto worked at him, the less Sasuke could control himself. He was at mercy to the movement, to Naruto, to his own nerve endings. He quickly came closer and closer to that ending, the concept morphing from confusing, to intriguing, to exciting. The finish was supposedly the best part, somehow better than the act Sasuke was already helpless to. He was suddenly glad to have Naruto here doing this for him; if he was alone, Sasuke wasn't sure he'd be able to continue past this point. It was less daunting this way.

When the climax came, Sasuke understood. It was indescribable. It was impossible to hold back his natural reaction. He hadn't thought it was possible to feel so good, not in this world. Not for Sasuke. But Naruto's hand had brought him there; it was another thing to add to the list of things Naruto made possible. His body twitched in the aftershocks, and Sasuke felt the last spurt leave him and splash on his stomach. Distantly, he knew he had yelled, but it was uncontrollable, and Sasuke hadn't even realized he had been the cause of it until moments after when the ecstasy ebbed. The pleasure was blinding, and the bed beneath him so soft, and the body on top of him so warm.

"Wow," Naruto said, his voice far away behind the rushing in Sasuke's ears. Sasuke blinked at him, realizing that Naruto had been watching him- not downward into his lap, like in the beginning, but up at his face. Somehow, that felt more exposing.

Sasuke's brain was nothing but fog, but through it he couldn't help the notion that Naruto was probably… He had just done that for Sasuke, so there was a favor that was to be expected to be returned, right? "N-Naruto- you-…" speaking was near impossible, like this. His tongue barely worked. "D-Do I- do you want me to-…"

Already knowing what he was trying to ask, which was a relief to Sasuke that he didn't have to continue to try to enunciate, Naruto smiled at him. "D-Don't worry about it! I knew you were probably going to fall asleep straight after, anyway."

That much was all too true. He was already losing consciousness halfway through Naruto's sentence.

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Usually when Sasuke woke up in Naruto's bed, Naruto was clinging to him. That morning, however, Sasuke was definitely the one doing the clinging. Almost his entire body was on top of Naruto, with his head in the square middle of his chest. His right arm was squished, but still clinging to Naruto's side, and his left leg was hitched over Naruto's thighs. His sleep had been dreamless, as it always was in this bed, so it was a bit jolting to suddenly be in such a different position than how he had fallen asleep. Naruto's left hand was running circles in the small of his back. He arched away from a particularly ticklish lap.

Naruto was awake. Sasuke looked up at him. It wasn't until Naruto smiled that he had the sense to be embarrassed. "Good morning! What's for breakfast, today?"

Breakfast. He wanted breakfast. As if it was a normal morning. He could feel that dreaded blush coming to his face again, so he turned it away from Naruto's view. Well, if Naruto was going to ignore it, then Sasuke certainly could, too… He cleared his throat. "Whatever you want…"

Somehow, Sasuke knew what Naruto was going to say before he said it. "Pancakes!" Sasuke sighed. Of course. He rolled his eyes. Then he was forced to detach himself from Naruto's body, something he found incredibly difficult to do. Both because he didn't want to and also because of how entangled they were. He didn't understand how Naruto seemed so unbothered by the blatant contact, or by the awkwardness of peeling themselves apart. Sasuke had felt almost rumpled from last night, as though he needed to iron his entire body and mind out. Naruto was able to stand up first, and he pumped his two fists in the air. "Alright, pancakes!"

And then he was gone, running into the kitchen to collect the ingredients. Sasuke was glad for it, glad to be alone to collect himself. He allowed himself a minute to assess his body. He felt like all of his bones had disassembled overnight. He didn't feel like there was any structure to him anymore. The moment of release flooded back into the forefront of his mind. His eyes even rolled back at the memory of how good it had been. A missing piece came to him and he looked down. Sure enough, he was clean, which meant that Naruto must have cleaned him off after he fell asleep. The guilt he felt for not being able to reciprocate doubled, as did the embarrassment at being rendered so useless. Sasuke couldn't have that be another thing he owed Naruto for.

It was all he could think about as Naruto chirped through conversation while they mixed the batter together. Naruto went on about how pancakes were his favorite breakfast food, and Sasuke had managed to combat that with rolled eyes, saying that it was because they were basically a dessert. All he could think about through it was dropping the bowl to the floor and pressing Naruto against the countertop.

He managed to last until they were a few pancakes into the cooking process. Sasuke was insistent on Naruto waiting to eat until they had made enough for the two of them, but the idiot had stuck his finger into the batter, and Sasuke watched in slow motion as he used those lips to suck it off. Thankfully there wasn't a cake on the pan at the time, and Sasuke had the good sense to turn the burner off.

Naruto had not been expecting to be kissed again, that was for sure. This time, though, while Naruto breathed through his weird response, stuttering, Sasuke ventured down Naruto's neck until the ragged breathing was laced with lovely little moans. He had Naruto propped up on the table, and it was easy to slide his hand into the pajama bottoms.

He had to look down at what he was doing. It hadn't looked like a difficult technique when Naruto did it, and Sasuke was an expert at copying movement. Sharingan. Sasuke activated it, and it was an excellent idea. The Rinnegan already made it easier to see, but with the Sharingan activated on top of it, Sasuke would be able to memorize every minute tremor. Naruto was different than Sasuke remembered, which was to be expected considering how young they had been the last time he had seen this part of his body. And also because he hadn't been hard, back then. He copied the movement from last night onto him, fixated on the sight.

As his hand worked, Naruto's skin dragged and stretched with it. The skin of it had become flush; the color reminding Sasuke of the way Naruto's lips turned after being kissed. Naruto was incredibly hard, but he still felt like velvet in Sasuke's hand. Up and down, up and down, and with each pass over the head, a bead of fluid grew larger in the slit. Sasuke's thumb swiped over it. The fluid smeared.

At a particular strangled moan, Sasuke looked up. *This* was the sight he should have been watching. Naruto was blushing all of the way down to his collarbone, pupils blown wide. Peculiarly, they had the slit in them that Sasuke wasn't used to seeing outside of battle. The marks on his cheeks were more prominent, too. That was interesting. Sasuke quickened his hand, the resulting squirming that Naruto had done setting something in him alight again. He wanted to win himself more, but he remembered something from the conversation last night as he felt the wetness still dripping from Naruto. "Do you want the lotion?" he asked.

"N-No," Naruto growled out. "Keep going."

And Sasuke did, keeping his pace up. It didn't take long before Naruto was spilling over him, and with Sasuke's quick eyes he was able to take in the entirety of his body. Everything from the splash of the climax to the flickering of Naruto's eyelids would remain etched in his memory forever. Sasuke had never wished for some type of auditory kekkei genkai before until that moment, because the sound deserved to be preserved in his memory, too. Somehow, he was sure it was going to be, regardless. Naruto's body continued to tremor, and Sasuke worked him through it until Naruto gave one final squirm and knocked his hand away. There was quite a mess that Sasuke didn't know how to handle.

Through heavy breathing, Naruto told him, "You didn't- have to do that. 'Gave me another heart attack."

But Sasuke knew that he did have to do it. "I was returning the favor."

Laughing, Naruto sat up from where he had fallen back on his elbows. “Thanks,” he said, and Sasuke swallowed hard. “Our pancakes are cold.”

“It’s your fault,” Sasuke told him rightfully.

Naruto sputtered, “You’re the one who attacked me!”

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If Sasuke had expected things to become awkward, it hadn’t. This was probably his only saving grace; he and Naruto ate their breakfast, washed dishes, and went out to train the morning away without any weird conversations or glances. Well. Naruto didn’t glance at him weird. Sasuke was certain he had to be staring at him a lot more than usual, but Naruto thankfully took no notice. This return to normal, that everything wasn’t suddenly different, made him want to stay. Perhaps there had been a moment earlier, just as he was washing his hand of Naruto’s mess, that he had wanted to leave. But then Naruto suggested they try to make one giant pancake with the rest of the batter and Sasuke was forced to hound him on all of the exact reasons why that was not only a stupid idea, but wouldn’t even work.

And then they were back to training again. They had mastered the first stage of the jutsu well enough by that point to be able to conjure the black, slightly transparent gas-like substance with ease. In need of ideas, the pair of them contemplated what methods would be the best to conjoin the molecules. Naruto continued to support the idea that it needed to simply be compressed, and while Sasuke had agreed with him at first, they had been doing nothing but that all the previous day.

So he thought heat might be the answer. It was not. Sasuke had Naruto hold the mass while he blew a fireball toward it. Interestingly, the mass simply ate up the entire ball of fire. After some careful experimentation where they attempted to heat the chakra from below while holding it from above, they assessed that this mass somehow could absorb heat. Sasuke formed the theory that maybe it had to do with the fact that the molecules were already moving at more of an accelerated state than fire itself. Naruto nodded like he understood, even though it was obvious he didn’t.

Perhaps, then, they needed to cool it down. Which would have been much easier done if either of them had an affinity for ice jutsus. Naruto had his wind nature, but neither of them had the first idea how to work with water. Naruto himself wasn’t exceptionally excellent at wind control, but he made a valid first attempt at conjuring a gust of wind. It didn’t seem to be doing anything to the black gas in Sasuke’s hand, but there was the chance that it would just take a while before they saw any results.

Though he still had plenty of chakra to work with, Sasuke was exhausted, but more so frustrated. They would have to figure out the process eventually. But the longer they worked with no results, the more Sasuke feared he was going to have to get some more information from Orochimaru. The article he had been constantly looking back on didn’t have much of any help on how the formation worked, just that suddenly it had. It kept talking about aligning the molecules together and then they snapped in place. A load of help that was.

Eventually, Sasuke had to admit that nothing was working. “We should take a break,” he sighed.

“No!” Naruto exclaimed. “I think we’ve almost got it!”

His annoyance seeped out of him in his scoff. “We’ve been doing the same thing for hours, now. Nothing’s working. I don’t think we can just cram it into place.”

Naruto’s bottom lip was jutting out at him. “Since when are you a quitter.”

A quitter-? Sasuke snapped his head toward him. “I didn’t say we should quit! I said, ‘*take a break’* so that we can think of a new tactic!”

“I think you’re just frustrated because it doesn’t come easy to you, like every other jutsu you’ve worked on,” Naruto goaded, and Sasuke saw red.

He had the front of Naruto’s shirt in his fist. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? I’ve been training my ass off every day for ten consecutive years! Just because it doesn’t take me as long to master what I’m working on like *you* always have to take.”

“That’s because the stuff *I* work on is actually difficult!” Naruto countered, and then Sasuke’s shirt was also being grabbed and they were both centimeters from each other’s faces.

Sasuke made the mistake of looking down at Naruto’s lips in that moment. With the way his heart was pumping, it was hard to differentiate where exactly the blood was going. When he looked back up to Naruto’s eyes, it was to see that his cheeks had that pink tint to them. He must have watched Sasuke’s eyes travel. Sasuke could feel his own blush betray him as the wide blue eyes also flickered downward.

It took way too long for them to let go of each other, as if they had to manually control each joint keeping them there. It probably had to do with how ignited he felt at their proximity all of a sudden, and Naruto must have felt the same. The guilt of his earlier statement haunted him. “You-” he found himself struggling to say, “you have a really good work ethic.”

“And I actually think all of your jutsus are really cool and must have been super hard to master,” Naruto admitted sheepishly.

Clicking his tongue and fervently studying at a nearby tree, Sasuke pursed his lips. “You better.” Sasuke was one of, like, three people in all of history to manage a perfect complete armored Susanoo. That was objectively *really cool*. Not that Sasuke cared about such arbitrary adjectives.

It made Naruto laugh, which was, if nothing else, satisfying to hear. Then Naruto began to pick at a spot on his chin. “So,” he elongated the syllable. “Taking a break?”

Sasuke grunted in affirmation. “We should eat something and try to talk out our other options. There’s got to be something we’re missing. We could get some rice balls or something quick from the market.”

“Oh,” there was something to Naruto’s voice that perked Sasuke’s ears.

“We’re not getting ramen again,” Sasuke said firmly.

“Th-that’s not what I was going to suggest!” Naruto insisted, and Sasuke had to eye him carefully at that. At this scrutiny, Naruto waved him away. “Nothing- nothing! Let’s go get some rice balls!” he chirped, and then he was shoving on Sasuke’s shoulders and getting him to leave. Sasuke only just managed to grab his cloak in time.

It wasn’t until they were at the edge of the training field that Sasuke finally understood what Naruto had been getting at. *Taking a break*. It had nothing to do with food. The idea plagued him as he watched Naruto’s bubbly personality chatting up a few random citizens in the market, calling each of them by name as Sasuke kept himself hidden in the background under his hood. When he had suggested rice balls, he had intended that they would return to the training field to eat so as to not deviate their focus on figuring out this jutsu. Instead, he found himself stammering as Naruto met back up with him, tray of rice in hand. “Do you… want to eat them back at your house?” Naruto blinked at him, but then, in a small voice, agreed that it was a good idea.

They were barely through Naruto’s patio door before they were kissing again. Sasuke grabbed the tray of food from Naruto’s hand and set it down on the dresser, Naruto pulling his cloak off for him while they both kicked off their shoes, unbothered by the rudeness of leaving them in the middle of the floor. While they were both exhausted from training, doing this felt almost like a necessity. They were sloppier than before as a result, which made it more exhilarating.

Still, with being so tired, Sasuke was sure to make Naruto be the one to fall backwards on the bed. It would not do for Sasuke to fall asleep from its comfort, not in the middle of the day when he had set himself a goal. Naruto had his hand under Sasuke’s shirt and his tongue in his mouth, both points of contact burning with that now welcome electricity. He shoved Naruto farther down into the bed as he attempted to get that much closer to him.

He didn’t want to feel shy anymore about his desire to touch Naruto’s body, so he wasn’t. He let his entire body fall, so that the pair of them were connected from ankles to lips. The gasp that escaped Naruto at the added weight had Sasuke smirking into the kiss. Why had he gone so long denying himself this? It was a weakness, maybe, but Naruto had always been his weakness. Naruto had always been his safety, even if it took him a while to realize it. Who better to be weak with than him?

There was also the bond to remember. Surely, other people don’t have *this* level of bond when they did this. He and Naruto were different. He and Naruto had known each other for literal lifetimes. It couldn’t possibly get stronger than that, right? And when they kissed like this- Sasuke doubted it was possible for other people to be so connected. He felt like he and Naruto had the same thought patterns. Their hearts were in time, even their breathing was synchronized. He could tell when Naruto wanted him to kiss his jaw, because *he* wanted to kiss Naruto’s jaw. The pieces of them slotted perfectly when they were like this, and-

“I GOT IT!” Naruto exclaimed, jerking his whole body under Sasuke.

Sasuke stopped what he was doing, perturbed. So much for being on the same wavelength.

“Give me your hand!” he instructed to Sasuke’s immense confusion. Hadn’t they just been doing something? But then Naruto was wiggling under him, and not in a good way. He scootched up on the bed so that he was sitting against the headboard, pulling at the hand Sasuke was using to keep himself up. Slowly, making sure to glare both his bewilderment and annoyance at him for stopping them, Sasuke sat back, kneeling now with Naruto’s thighs still between his legs.

Naruto wasted no time grabbing Sasuke’s now free hand and setting it in place over his own. Before Sasuke could make sense of it, he felt Naruto flowing the familiar energy into the space between their hands. “O-Oi! Don’t do that here!” Sasuke snatched his hand away before Naruto had them conjuring that dangerous gas-like chakra, of which its disintegrating properties could so easily slip from between them with nowhere else to land but the bed.

Quick to capture Sasuke’s hand again, Naruto insisted, “Come on, I’ve got it! I know what to do!” Still unsure and wildly perplexed, Sasuke eyed his strange counterpart carefully, but gave his hand all the same. Together, they produced that unstable chakra fission, Sasuke making certain to not move his hand a muscle, lest they destroy the best thing in his life: Naruto’s bed. Naruto concentrated hard, and Sasuke looked up at him through his furrowed eyebrows to see that he had his tongue peeking out between his lips, the tongue that had just been in Sasuke’s mouth moments prior. Sasuke couldn’t help but roll his eyes. They *could* still be kissing right now. Naruto growled out his frustration, “*Come on*,” which was only more annoying for Sasuke to hear, because he would have preferred if Naruto was growling from-

A hand was in Sasuke’s hair, pulling him in for Naruto to capture his lips. Eyes wide, Sasuke panicked- what the *hell* was Naruto thinking? The dangerous chakra between their hands swayed. He pulled back, desperate to not let his anxiety about dropping it here become a reality. “What the hell are you-”

But Naruto still had a hold of the back of Sasuke’s head, and used it to pull him back in. His lips brushed against Sasuke’s, taunting him. “*Trust me*,” he whispered, and the sound of it ripped down Sasuke’s spine.

And Sasuke did trust him, so he let himself be kissed.

His heart was still racing with the fear of the power they held together slipping loose, but Naruto’s lips on his were sweet. This kiss was slow, agonizingly slow. He felt like he was drowning in it, a terrifying thing when he needed to focus on what was happening in their hands. Honestly, what was Naruto’s plan, here? All Sasuke wanted to do was drop their hands, and then maybe put them to use somewhere else; to join again back to where they were before Naruto yelled his stupid interruption. Back to their bond, when their hearts beat as-

Oh.

As Sasuke realized it, he found that he couldn’t scold himself for not figuring it out sooner. Naruto had always been the one to be able to recognize the truth of their bond. Sasuke had never truly denied it, of course, but the way he feared it left him unable to look so directly at it. He had always been too preoccupied trying to destroy it, this terrifying bond. The way

they connected was too natural for Sasuke to have been oblivious of it, which is why he had to actively block it from his mind for so many years. Naruto never had to do that. Naruto had clung to it for years, was able to see it for what it truly was.

It was the specific way they connected, which was so easy to see when Naruto's lips were on his. Like the teeth of a zipper, slotting perfectly until they became unbreakable. The cloth would rip before the two distinct pieces of metal would separate. There was a specific way they needed to align, first, but once it was, the connection would be formed. Molecule by molecule, the bonds needed to slot. Each individual tooth needed to find its match, Sasuke's to Naruto's to Sasuke's again, until…

A bright light burned the insides of Sasuke's eyelids red. He fluttered them open, slowly pulling away from the kiss to see. Between their hands was a bright orb, softly emanating a pure white object. It was floating between them, but Sasuke could tell that the object was solid and heavy.

Beside him, Naruto let out a delighted, elongated scream of excitement. Before Sasuke could huff out his laugh, he was being grabbed again by Naruto's free hand, and then kissed once more. It was a ridiculous display of his exhilaration at finally cracking the code of this jutsu, making Sasuke lightheaded. Laughing, Sasuke dragged himself out of this kiss, which was a difficult thing to do. "Oi. We don't even know what it does, yet."

"I bet something really cool," Naruto mumbled, attempting to recapture Sasuke's lips again.

Quickly turning his head so that Naruto's mouth landed on his jaw instead, he chuckled, amused. "Let's figure out what it does before it explodes, dumbass."

Humming, Naruto finally stopped attempting to kiss him. "I don't think it explodes."

"Then what do you- *don't touch it*-!" But Naruto had already grabbed the grapefruit-sized object from where it was floating between them. Still amped by the anxiety of what they had created, Sasuke berated, "You dumbass! The last form it was in disintegrated *solid rock*! Why would you touch it without testing it first?!"

He at least had the good sense to look ashamed, rubbing the back of his head with his free hand. "Ah- intuition?" Sasuke glared at him. "It doesn't matter- look! It's fine!" He tossed the ball up, its weight landing heavily in his palm. It was not fine, Sasuke thought. Tsunade might have needed to reconstruct him another hand. "Do you think we can change its shape?" That was a good question. Together, they each focused on manipulating the mass, which very easily molded to their will, stretching out into a flat rectangle. Frowning, Naruto mused, "It kinda reminds me of the Truth Seeking Orbs."

"Can't be," Sasuke rebutted as they continued to maneuver the chakra into different shapes as easily as putty. "We haven't mastered all five natures. And it doesn't seem to be absorbing chakra at all." Jutting his lip out in thought, Naruto had the mass move farther away from them with Sasuke following his lead, curious as to how far they could control it. It floated over to the other side of the room, where the rice balls sat on Naruto's dresser. With a small bump, the tray fell over upside down onto the floor.

Sasuke glared at Naruto, who winced. “I was trying to pick them up.” Sighing, Sasuke coaxed the mass into more of a crane-like shape, and together they worked on closing it around the fallen tray. Thankfully it had a lid, so there wasn’t a giant mess on the floor. Carefully, they were able to lift it over to where they were on the bed, flipping it back over right-side-up in between them. Just as Sasuke was about to drop his control to grab the rice balls with his hand, the white chakra shrunk slightly and the entire plastic tray cracked at the pressure. One ball of rice started to fall.

With his Rinnegan, Sasuke was able to catch it before it landed in their laps, though a few grains did fall out at the impact. “Oi,” he scolded.

“That wasn’t me!” Naruto exclaimed. “You stopped moving it. And I can’t,” Sasuke watched Naruto’s brow furrowed. “I can’t move it without you.”

That was interesting. “You were able to toss it, earlier.”

“Yeah, but that was…” And as Naruto dropped his hand, so did the heavy mass; with no one controlling it, gravity took its physics onto it. Sasuke was forced into a choice: either have a lapful of rice or get crushed by the weight of the solid chakra. He took the rice, but not without sending Naruto a look that perfectly conveyed that the mess was *his* fault. Blinking, Naruto noted, “We both need to control it.”

No shit. “It takes both of us to move it and change its shape, but only one of us to keep it in place. Without either of us, it’ll fall,” he summarized. He stood up, finally vacating Naruto’s lap and letting the ball of rice drop to the floor.

Naruto whined after him, though he did take the other half of the control of the chakra so that it was once again movable. “Where are you going?”

Clicking his tongue, Sasuke rolled his eyes, “We’re not going to test this thing’s limit in here.”

“But…” Naruto trailed off, still laying in position on the bed. Which was very rich. It was *his* fault they stopped kissing in the first place. Now they had to get back to that training field and figure this shit out. This thing was probably exceptionally dangerous, and they had a responsibility to learn to control it. He conveyed all of this with one deadpanned glare. Naruto slumped his shoulders greatly. “Fine,” he grumbled.

Unamused, Sasuke instructed, “Pick up that rice before it grows mold.”

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They came to discover very quickly that this power they shared was obscenely strong. Not that it was surprising at all, with the two of them, but the pure physical strength of it seemed nearly unstoppable. The mass cleared through trees and solid rock with the smallest amount of exertion on either of their parts. It was like a tiny, unbreakable cannon ball; even at low speeds, the chakra barreled through anything Naruto and Sasuke wanted it to. It didn’t matter what shape they had it in, either. When they made it exceptionally thin, like a brilliant white sheet of paper, the boulder they tried it on moved effortlessly when they pressed the flat side

to it. This begged the question of *how* strong was it? Because surely Sasuke's perfect defense would stop it.

It became evident that they were working with an S rank jutsu when the little ball of light pierced through the Susanoo's armor like *butter*. It hadn't even flinched, simply glided by as if the most powerful defense known to ninjakind was nothing but air. The sight of it made Sasuke need to sit down. While Naruto obliviously whooped his excitement, Sasuke had to reroute his disbelief.

He thought back to Orochimaru's warnings. The castor of the jutsu was not immune. If the ball of chakra could clear through the Susanoo, it could decapitate one of their heads at the smallest misuse. He explained this to Naruto. This kind of offense- it was truly unstoppable. And the mass was heavy- changing it midcourse took effort. It was better to have one of them drop control to stop it in its tracks. He thought of the Chidori, and how it required the Sharingan to use it effectively. He knew of what happened to Kakashi with his teammate. If Naruto wasn't in Sage Mode or higher, it would be up to Sasuke to see the danger and stop it from its unrelenting path.

As well as being an unrelenting offense, it could just as well defend. Their merged chakra managed to withstand Naruto's Rasenshuriken at a direct blow. In a pinch, they could create themselves a defense that, judging by how easily it pierced it, was greater than Sasuke's Susanoo. This, plus the fact that it could be molded into whatever shape they wanted it to be, was a dizzying realization.

After the day of experimentation, Sasuke pulled Naruto away from his overhyped cheering to lay down what they knew of its weaknesses. "We know that this power is dangerous. Someone could easily outsmart us with it and make us hurt ourselves or our teammates if we aren't vigilant. Genjutsu could make us misjudge our movements-"

"It's a good thing one of us has got a pretty strong Sharingan for that," Naruto noted, and Sasuke smirked. He also knew that Naruto himself would fare well against genjutsu now that he had the Kyuubi on his side.

"Right, but we can still be outsmarted," Sasuke reminded him. "There is also the fact that it's not subtle." He gestured to the floating orb that Naruto was keeping stationary next to them. It was emanating a brilliant glow and the object itself was a bright white. "It would be difficult to keep it discreet, especially at night or in the dark. We also have to be careful if we use it as a shield to not completely surround ourselves with it. If we do and one of us becomes incapacitated, we'll suffocate in it." That being said, it could be used against their enemy in such a way, but that kind of morbid death was neither of their styles. While Sasuke wouldn't be against it in an emergency, he can't see Naruto ever doing such a thing to someone. "It's also not very fast, especially as far as you and I are concerned."

Sighing, Naruto pouted at him, "Yeah, yeah, way to make this super cool jutsu sound lame, Sasuke."

Sasuke's eyes narrowed in response. "This isn't about making it sound lame. It's important for us to analyze how an enemy can counter it."

It didn't seem like Naruto was listening to him though. Instead, he was tapping his chin and looking at the floating orb. As though he was experimenting, Naruto dropped the hand that was keeping the orb in place, and it smashed into the ground, it's weight denting into the hard earth. "How do we get rid of it?" he pondered aloud, and Sasuke's expression fell. How *do* they get rid of it? So far, they had been working with the same ball of chakra that they created back in Naruto's apartment. They had both dropped control of it multiple times, but the ball still remained. Quieter, Naruto then muttered, "And how… do we make more?"

A blush had invaded Sasuke's cheeks. Naruto had a point; it wasn't like they were going to kiss in the middle of a battle every time they needed this jutsu. Clearing his throat, Sasuke coughed, "I think we'll be able to make more easier, now that we know how it's supposed to feel."

"…Without kissing?"

Sputtering, Sasuke spat, "*Yes* without-" he stopped himself before he said that embarrassing word in this context. He grumbled for a moment before continuing, "We know now what we were missing in the process. It's our connection that brings the molecules back together. I don't think it'll be difficult anymore for us to remember what that feels like to do it again."

"Oh." Naruto said simply, and Sasuke had to flash his eyes to him. He was looking back, a faint pinkness to his cheeks, chewing on the inside of his lip. It was the slight, withheld smile that made Sasuke's heart thump.

Desperate to get back on track, Sasuke addressed the other question, "I think we might have to try everything in reverse to dismantle it. Here, try to pull it apart back into the first stage, again." He held his hand out to signal to Naruto to grab hold of their orb. It was slightly different to rip their joined chakra molecules as opposed to each other's separate ones, but it turned out to not be exceptionally difficult to do. They got it quickly, morphing it back into that dangerous dark gas, then dispersing it harmlessly into the air.

"I guess that's pretty good for today!" Naruto chirped the end of their training session. As he said it, Sasuke could feel every ache in his muscles come to the forefront of his mind. He had used the Susanoo multiple times today, and even in training it was brutal. "Maybe we can have an early dinner back home?"

An early dinner. Something about that had Sasuke pause, and it took him a while to place it. And early dinner at Naruto's apartment, and then… what? And then Sasuke would have spent the entire weekend in Konoha. It was bad enough he had spent two nights in a row, nearing a full 48 hours here. With the way his muscles ached, Sasuke knew there would be no way he would be able to leave Naruto's apartment if he stepped foot in it again and saw that bed. Not to mention that if Naruto kissed him… He floundered for his excuse, "Aren't you supposed to be leaving for Sunagakure?"

Blue eyes blinking, Naruto tilted his head, "Oh, yeah, but that's in the morning."

"You haven't packed at all," Sasuke noted.

“It’s just throwing clothes in a bag- I can do that in two minutes,” Naruto insisted, and there was a lightness to his tone that Sasuke was wary of.

Of course, Naruto was diverting his hints. This time, though, something told Sasuke that Naruto wasn’t entirely unaware of them. Better to be blunt, then. “I have to go,” he said.

He was quiet for only a moment at this, but to Sasuke it was a thick silence. Because he was Naruto, though, he made up for it with his following bright tone, “You sure you don’t want to eat first?” Sasuke turned to him; as much as Sasuke pledged Naruto’s ineptitudes, he knew he wasn’t so naïve as to not understand why Sasuke had to leave now. Not with their bond. Sure enough, Naruto sighed at the look. “Okay. Well, listen, you should still come visit me over there next week. We shouldn’t stop working on this jutsu when we *just* figured it out.”

It was a tactful way to remind Sasuke that he wanted him there without cornering him into coming. Sasuke was free to choose. He couldn’t help the smirk on his lips. “Maybe.”

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12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Sasuke was *definitely* going to visit Suna when Naruto was there. He had already decided that ever since he first envisioned the look on Gaara's face if he were to openly waltz into his home. He was looking forward to it so much that he didn't visit those other dimensions during the week; the time difference would only make him wait longer. Laying low in a small village just outside the borders in Amegakure, Sasuke counted the days.

In the end, the look on the Kazekage's face was absolutely worth it. It seemed Naruto had not mentioned Sasuke's possible arrival at all, which made it all for the better.

Perching himself on the open window of the Kazekage's office, Sasuke reveled in Gaara's shock. Certainly he was bewildered as to how Sasuke managed to sneak his way this far into Suna's defenses undetected. As if it was a difficult thing for someone of Sasuke's caliber to infiltrate- this Rinnegan made it child's play. His expression, though still fairly emotionless as it always was, looked to be at a breaking point between livid and baffled. Behind him, that ever-present sand glittered, the chakra enlaced throughout the cloud of it sparking more evidence of his anger.

Gaara was the first to spot him, then his siblings. Naruto's back was to him, so it wasn't until he grew perplexed of their sudden expressions that he turned to see what they were staring at. As soon as he caught Sasuke's eye, that large dopey grin overcame him. "Sasuke!" He called in greeting, to which Sasuke cocked his jaw in response, not quite wanting to look away from the satisfactory sight of the Kazekage. "Great! We're almost done here- right, Gaara?"

As Naruto turned back to him, Gaara's eyes widened even more at Naruto. His speechlessness was another marvelous reaction. Sasuke knew that it was Naruto's presence and Naruto's presence alone that prevented this occasion from being anything other than a battlefield. Naruto was oblivious to the fact that Sasuke wasn't exactly *welcome* in this country- or any of them, really. Even Fire, for most citizens. Sasuke had never felt the need to tell him that his stories from Suna were all done pretty much in disguise. He still had warrants for his arrest in every country outside of Fire, even here in Suna; Naruto was not exactly aware of this. It seemed Gaara wasn't keen on cluing Naruto in on that, either, so he floundered between looking at the two of them. Good.

His brother was less tactful, smacking his hands onto the desk to screech, "Oi! What the hell do you think you're doing, strolling in here?!"

Scoffing, Sasuke rolled his eyes. Naruto seemed to find this just as ridiculous, judging by the way he pouted, "It's just Sasuke, Kankuro."

“J-*Just* Sasuke?!” Gaara’s brother, apparently named Kankuro, squeaked, animatedly pointing an accusing hand at where Sasuke lay perched in the window. “*He tried to assassinate all of the Kages*! He can’t just sneak in here- how did you get past the security-?!” Sasuke pursed his lips. Though Sasuke *did* want to assassinate all of the Kages at one point, he had only ended up divulging that information to Team Seven. The specific goal at the Kage Summit that everyone else seemed to assume things about had only been an attack on Danzo at the time. The other Kages attacked him of their own accord, needlessly getting in the way.

Clicking his tongue, Naruto hopped across the room to grab hold of Sasuke’s arm, pulling him down from his perch on the windowsill. “Who cares about that?” If he was a less guarded person, Sasuke might have laughed at the looks of intense anguish this sentence received. That, and Naruto was still dragging him back across the room toward the exit door, which held his focus. “I invited him here, so it’s fine. We’re done, anyway, so I’ll see you guys tomorrow!”

“Naruto!” the sister called. “We’re still not done with the-”

But Naruto had slammed the door shut, whispering desperately into Sasuke’s ear, “*Run*!” and, before Sasuke could properly situate himself, had set off at top speed. As he was still gripping Sasuke by the wrist, Sasuke was left to stumble behind him, trying to keep up.

“Oi!” Sasuke’s attempts to slow him were futile, as Naruto had the upper hand to yank him through the unfamiliar hallways, almost making Sasuke faceplant down the many stairwells he rushed them down. Unceremoniously, Naruto burst them through what seemed to be a back exit before finally dropping Sasuke, catching his heavy breath.

“Oh, thank god!” Naruto exclaimed through his breathing, hunched over with his head in his palm. “I thought I was never going to escape!”

Raising an eyebrow, Sasuke deadpanned, “Naruto,” to catch his attention. He pointed to a lump of sand on his shoulder which had manifested itself into a floating eyeball, that optic nerve jutsu Gaara favored.

Naruto let out an agonized cry and attempted to smash it away, but it simply dispersed and reformed. Scoffing, Sasuke disintegrated it with a controlled burst of black flame. As soon as the sand turned to ash, Naruto grabbed his arm again. “Shit! Hurry!” And then he was pulling them off again, and Sasuke knew by the way Naruto’s chakra surged that he was serious about them escaping.

What had Naruto so desperate to get away from those three? As concerning as this notion was, Sasuke preferred a much more dignified escape. “Naruto,” he finally managed to right himself enough to tug the frantic idiot backwards, who stumbled. He wasn’t going to take Naruto’s desire to leave for granted; he had gotten the reaction that he wanted in coming here, and didn’t care much to stay for anything else. Grabbing tight onto Naruto’s shoulder, Sasuke focused on a potted plant sitting on a distant rooftop, and then suddenly the pair of them were on said rooftop in its place. Naruto was coughing- he must have been midbreath for the teleportation, which was always unpleasant. “One more,” Sasuke insisted, and then focused

on the furthest object he could, and they were near on the complete opposite side of the village.

He probably should have warned Naruto that he was going to do that, as it was pretty jarring to teleport without warning. But Naruto, for his part, seemed relieved. “Ah,” he sighed, doubling over in exasperation. “Do you think we lost her?”

Sasuke had no doubts they did. He was more interested in an explanation, though. “Is there a reason why we had to escape like that?” Sasuke himself was quite winded; he had spent the past week training this teleportation jutsu, and hadn’t expected to need to use it so suddenly with another person in tow.

Tormented, Naruto wailed, suddenly animated. “She’s been forcing me all week to do nothing but sorting his paperwork for every waking minute! I swear, she’s gunna make me do it in my sleep soon! I barely have time to shit in the morning before she’s busting the bathroom door open on me!” He almost had tears in his eyes as he said, “I mean, I know being a Kage is a lot of paperwork, but I think she’s doing it to kill me, now. I swear, half of the decrees I’m organizing are made up! I haven’t done anything fun all week!” Defeated, Naruto dropped his shoulders again. “Why are girls so scary? I think Temari is the scariest.”

Temari? So that was the sister’s name. Looking around at all of the construction, Sasuke didn’t doubt that every paperwork Naruto was going through was indeed legitimate. He couldn’t help the small smile on his lips as he said, “Stop complaining. This is good education for you.”

Whining, Naruto frowned at him, “Not you, too! I’m not learning anything here! She’s just making me do her busy work. And when we’re not doing that, we’re at boring meetings.” Sasuke doubted it was all unimportant; the documents were probably important infrastructure plans and other governing policies. Sorting them meant Naruto had to read them, which was good exposure. “I was hoping we’d be able to at least go around the village and see how everything is going, you know? I’ve barely been able to see the sights or taste the cuisine- Oh!” He righted himself up again. “Speaking of which, I found it! Come on!”

Even with Sasuke’s eyes, it was difficult to keep up with Naruto sometimes. He was dragging Sasuke away again, guiding them both down to the streets of Suna at twilight. They weren’t quite running this time, more of a jog, and the slower pace made the skin around his wrist burn under Naruto’s grip, especially with the crowd of spectators walking around them. With his arm compromised, he couldn’t adjust his hood to cover his face further.

It didn’t take long before Naruto was pulling them through the doors of a small restaurant. Sasuke could roll his eyes at Naruto’s predictability all day. He had really dragged Sasuke around so suddenly all for food. Ramen, of course; Sasuke didn’t need the hints on top of the patrons’ tables to know. “Hello-” the hostess froze mid-bow, her eyes going wide at the vibrance of Naruto’s signature orange outfit and other notifiable details. “Are you- N-Naruto-san?!”

Great. Sasuke did his best to hide himself behind the notifiable figure, who had bashfully used his free hand to rub the back of his head. It would have been a great time for the idiot to

let go of Sasuke's wrist. "Ah- hi! Yes!" he didn't seem to want to linger on that at all, instead asking, "Do you guys still have that tomato broth?"

Tomato broth. Sasuke's ears perked. "Y-Yes! Yes we do!" the hostess squeaked.

"Great! Can we go sit?" Naruto asked, and then gestured back to Sasuke, who froze at being so blatantly presented when he was trying to assimilate.

Her assurance died on her tongue as she made sense of the person behind Naruto, her eyes somehow growing larger. Thankfully she seemed too shocked to scream his name as she had with Naruto's, but the other customers were already looking this way, and they were all coming to the same realization. Gritting his teeth, Sasuke's lip twitched. Eventually the hostess managed to hum out her, "Uh-huh."

"Thanks!" Naruto chirped obliviously, leading Sasuke through the restaurant, parading around the completely unashamed grip he had on Sasuke's wrist. After what felt like an eternity, Naruto sat them both at the table where a menu was propped in the middle. They were in a booth against the window at the back of the room. Even though they were at the far end of the restaurant, there was not a single person who wasn't gawking at them. Naruto didn't seem to notice. "This is the place I had that ramen with the tomato broth! I spotted it on the first day here and have been trying to sneak out all week to come! I wanted to bring you here so you can try it."

He wished Naruto wouldn't say such a thing so loudly. A waitress approached them, stammering out her greeting and bowing far too deeply. Sasuke let Naruto do the ordering: two bowls of the tomato broth ramen with extra beef. When they were alone again, Naruto continued on about the things he was being forced to do under Temari's unyielding tyranny. Sasuke found it difficult to keep his attention with how many eyes were on his back. A different waitress interrupted them to bring them their bowls. She had been completely silent at first, but then suddenly burst out with an over-compensated bow, "Thank you for saving all of our lives!"

It made Sasuke cringe to hear it, but Naruto laughed it off. "Ah- Don't worry about it! We would do it again in a heartbeat!" '*We*,' he said, including Sasuke in the sentiment. As if it was that simple of a concept. 'Saving all of their lives'. Whatever. She bowed again and ran off. Naruto was frowning as he snapped his chopsticks apart. "People here are really nice, but a bit much."

But Sasuke knew that it wasn't just people here in Suna, not for Naruto. Naruto would have a lifetime of this ahead of him everywhere he went. The Konoha residents were still enamored with him, but they had been overly exposed to him by now with the way he seemed to be everywhere at once. Still, people gawked and sang his praise up and down the streets. If he was still a novelty back in their old town, places like this would be downright starstruck with him. It was different for Sasuke, who had a different kind of fame. He knew to blend in; it was a necessity for him to be inconspicuous, as his form of notoriety could be dangerous if the wrong person recognized him. Naruto was so… bright, though. Physically as well as personality-wise. Everyone knew of the marks on his cheeks and his affinity with orange, and to top it off he was constantly the loudest in the room. It was hard to miss him. Sasuke had curated himself to be more difficult to pick out of a crowd, but his Uchiha features were

nearly impossible to mask with Naruto's eccentricities right next to him to spark people's memories.

"Try your ramen!" Naruto's insistent order snapped Sasuke out of his thoughts. His eyes were just as bright as the rest of him. Warily, Sasuke pulled his chopsticks apart with the help of his teeth before getting them set in his hand. It certainly smelled alright.

He took a mouthful. It was very good. Naruto was watching him expectantly for him to finish chewing; he found it was difficult to swallow with the way that soft smile was aimed at him. "It'd be better with rice," he managed to say before he did something ridiculous like blush.

This made Naruto laugh, for some reason. He seemed satisfied with Sasuke's reaction, though, and set back to eating from his own bowl. "It's so nice to eat out! I kept asking Gaara to break us both out so we can come here, but he's so busy. The food they served us was always so delicious, though, so I wasn't too upset, but they didn't have ramen!" A travesty, surely.

Sasuke's attention was brought to a presence stomping up to them. A small presence. A child no older than five years old, and she was holding out a marker and a piece of paper. "Can I have your autograph?" What she had said was a question on a technicality, but it definitely came off as more of a demand as she thrusted the objects in Naruto's face.

"Oh," Naruto blinked at her, but then was laughing again. The little girl had a certain determination to her that Sasuke might have admired if he didn't find the situation so outlandish. Wondering where her parents were, Sasuke spotted a mother who looked mortified a few steps away.

"I'm so sorry! Asui, really, you shouldn't be so rude!" she was scolding breathlessly.

"It's no problem!" Naruto insisted as he took the paper and marker from the little girl and began to scrawl out his signature. "I'm still not really used to this kind of thing, though!"

The harsh, resolute eyes of the five-year-old then were on Sasuke, and he was not proud to admit that the look made him flinch. "You're Sasuke-san?" once again, it wasn't as much of a question as it was a severe observation.

He had to answer her, but he found it was like ripping his own toenails. "Y-Yes."

"You're scary," she said.

But she did not sound scared at all. Quite the contrary.

Naruto was laughing louder at that, to Sasuke's mortification. The little girl's mother scolded her, thankfully matching Sasuke's embarrassment. "He is scary," Naruto agreed through his laughter, leaning in close to her and saying in a mock-whisper behind his hand, "but between you and me, he's a lot less scary after you see him cook pancakes."

"Oi!" Sasuke quickly scolded, looking around him in a panic, hoping no one else was able to hear that, which they totally could, and he was going to show Naruto just how *scary* he could

be-

“Pancakes?” the little girl repeated.

“Yeah! He wears this frilly pink apron-”

The closest thing Sasuke could grab was the bottle of soy sauce, which he brought down onto the top of Naruto’s head, “Quit making things up!”

The idiot was laughing again, damn him. Sasuke should have hit him hard enough to shatter the glass of the bottle. In the commotion, the little girl grabbed her paper and marker back and walked away without notice. Her mother floundered for a moment. “Asui- I’m so sorry,” she bowed at them before following her destructive force of a daughter.

Bitterly, Sasuke sat back in his seat, stewing in his disgruntlement. Naruto smirked at him. “It’s true though! You’re not scary when you’re making pancakes!”

“I *don’t* wear an *apron*!” Sasuke insisted before he could stop himself. He forced himself to sit back against the booth. Whatever. At least she hadn’t commanded he sign that damn piece of paper, too.

A familiar trio of chakra entered the building, and Sasuke had half of a mind to flee, but his frustration with Naruto decided for him to let his companion be caught as retribution. If Naruto wasn’t adept enough to see his own danger in time, then that was on him. Sure enough, Gaara’s sister had Naruto’s ear pinched in her fingers almost instantly. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Struggling under her forceful grasp on him, Naruto squirmed, “T-Temari!”

“Do you really think a Kage can just walk away from his duties like that?” Temari nagged, and Sasuke had to admire the level of her intimidation. Though, to be honest, it was shadowed for him under the little girl’s just before. Unbothered, Sasuke slurped his noodles as Naruto howled his pain. “Your work isn’t finishing itself the longer you squander around here.”

Sasuke could hear the other patrons in the shop gasping as Gaara walked through the restaurant. Their awed ‘*Kazekage-sama*’s were abhorrent to listen to, and he didn’t want to turn around to see them all bowing to him. “Temari,” Gaara sounded as monotone as ever. “At least let him finish his meal.”

“Ah- yes, yes- thank you Gaara!” Naruto continued to writhe desperately as Temari glared at her brother. With the click of her tongue she finally let go of Naruto’s ear, and he cried out in relief. Rubbing at the injury, Naruto pouted, but didn’t say anything other than a few whimpers.

Unpleased, Temari grumbled, “You’re too easy on him.”

Behind her, Kankuro shrugged, “Told ya you were gunna scare him away.” She aimed a punch at his jaw, which he only just managed to block.

“Enough,” Gaara scolded his siblings. “Don’t fight here.”

Good to know he didn’t want to cause a scene in this restaurant. Sasuke’s eyes had flashed sideways to him at the words, but he remained unaffected and continued to eat his ramen in silence, even when he felt Gaara’s eyes on him in return. The satisfaction of being an unremovable thorn in the Kazekage’s side was a comfort to him. He might have his thumb over his annoying siblings and obnoxious village, but with Naruto here, Sasuke couldn’t be touched. Sasuke might have been more smug about it had Naruto not then decided to offer, “You guys should come sit down and eat with us!”

Really, Sasuke should have expected that. It was Naruto, after all. Temari had scoffed at the question, but responded with an indignant, “Fine,” before sitting herself down forcefully next to Naruto, who yelped his surprise at being shoved further into the booth so suddenly.

Seeing the problem with this, Sasuke side-eyed Gaara again. Sure enough, he was met with quite a determined glare. If this were any other circumstance, Sasuke would not have moved a centimeter. Probably would have brought out his Susanoo before showing any sign of submission to a Kage. But Naruto’s protection of civility was a double-edged sword. Painfully, he scooted over, dragging his bowl with him.

And then Gaara was sitting next to him, which was as bizarre as it was uncomfortable. He was pressed as far against the window without it being ridiculous as possible. Kankuro grabbed a nearby chair and positioned it at the head of the table. “What are you guys eating?” he asked as if Sasuke was included in the question.

Knowing Naruto would answer for him, Sasuke continued to mind his own business. “It’s ramen with a tomato broth! Pretty much the only thing Sasuke likes is tomatoes, so I wanted him to try this.”

Trust Naruto to drag him into the conversation anyway. “I’ve had tomato broth before,” Sasuke said to Naruto, and Naruto alone.

“Only tomatoes, huh?” There was something in Kankuro’s voice that Sasuke really didn’t like. What the hell was that supposed to mean, anyway?

“And cats!” Naruto chirped.

Sasuke could kill him.

He could also kill the brother and sister, who were both not even trying to hold in their laughter. “When did I say that?!” he spat at Naruto.

“Well, you’re really good with them!”

“Because the Uchiha clan specialized in ninneko,” he explained, wishing desperately that he could return to being a silent observer over in his corner.

“Yeah, but you’re good with regular cats, too,” Naruto continued unnecessarily. He took another bite of his ramen, and with a full mouth added, “Teme-chan came to see me off on

Monday! I left my window open for him, so that he can still go inside this week."

Sasuke's hand slammed down on the table. "*You left your window open*-?!" he caught himself to late, having not wanted to show so much emotion.

"So he could get inside!"

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Sasuke willed his headache away. This idiot really knew no bounds. Leaving his window open when he knew he was going to be gone for two weeks. And Sasuke was certain he would just stroll right inside without a care for someone attempting to assassinate him. At this point, Sasuke didn't think he would be able to blame anyone other than Naruto if that were to happen. Let his apartment be laced with bombs, then. All for that stupidly named cat. It was too much for Sasuke to voice, so he suffered with his thoughts in silence. Thankfully, Temari didn't have this struggle, "Do you not care if your place gets robbed?"

Frowning, Naruto finished noisily sipping at his broth. "Why would someone rob me?"

Disbelief was etched in Kankuro's face, "Are you dumb?"

That was obvious. Sasuke clenched his jaw, though, because a robbery was the last thing Sasuke was worried about. Naruto didn't have many material things for something like that, and frankly he was certain that any mere thief would not find him an ideal person to steal from. He had the reputation of being the most powerful ninja in the world to mislead them all into thinking he would probably be a difficult heist. The real issue was the fact that it was common sense that Naruto would become the next Hokage; the Shinobi Alliance was still too new, not to mention the vast number of rogue ninja who would want to eliminate him as a threat. But he knew that no matter how he was to voice this, Naruto would do nothing but brush it off-

"Naruto, I would have assumed with how many times people have attempted to kill you, you would be more careful about these things," Gaara said evenly. Lip twitching, Sasuke couldn't pinpoint why he didn't like this coming from Gaara.

As predicted, Naruto groaned, rolling his eyes, "Yeah, yeah, whatever. I'd be able to handle it."

"You won't be able to handle it if someone laces poison on your tableware," Temari adds firmly. "Or sets a bomb under your toilet seat."

"I think I'd be able to notice if someone put a bomb under my toilet seat," Naruto pursed his lips at her. At this, Sasuke couldn't help the humorless laugh that left him. This earned him Naruto's attention, "What are *you* laughing at, bastard?"

Whatever. "You hadn't even noticed there was a cabinet behind the mirror you've owned all of your life."

"That's different!" Naruto exclaimed, flustered.

When Gaara spoke again, Sasuke felt his blood boiling with each word. “Still, Naruto, you should be securing your home every time you leave it. You should be more careful about those things.” He was one to talk, that’s for sure. The amount of assassination attempts Sasuke knew Gaara had endured was almost absurd. Not to mention the one time he was actually killed by one. But still, he didn’t like him saying these things to Naruto. Naruto didn’t need to be babied in such a way. Naruto had taken care of himself for long enough to be trusted, even if it was a miracle his stupidity hadn’t been the death of him yet. He certainly didn’t need Gaara mothering him.

Yeah, that’s what was annoying. Naruto didn’t need to be protected. And even if he did, Sasuke… Sasuke bit his tongue. Whatever. Under the table, Sasuke crossed his legs, forcing himself to become disinterested in the conversation.

Another waitress was back; it seemed the staff was taking turns at their table, which was annoying. It was weird for there to be someone taking their order in the first place. He preferred ordering his food at the front, like a normal dining experience. Less human interaction. But she enthusiastically greeted the others and promised to bring them their meals shortly. Sasuke didn’t want to finish the rest of his noodles, but he continued to spoon himself the broth. He did like it. The siblings were talking about something, now, and Sasuke didn’t want to be concerned with it. Naruto wasn’t talking, so what did he care? Wait.

As he pinpointed the absurdity of that, he looked up and nearly jumped at the realization that Naruto was watching him. Why? Sasuke furrowed his eyebrows back at him; he didn’t enjoy being watched so closely, but it was just Naruto. What did he want? Confusingly, Naruto only smiled back at him. It was one of those close-mouthed ones that jarred Sasuke down to his core, his blue eyes shutting happily in the same motion. What was that about? Because Sasuke… was enjoying the broth? Whatever. That was no reason for Naruto to be looking at him like that. It was distracting, and Sasuke didn’t like being watched- or smiled at like that. It made his heart race. It was weird.

Then Gaara’s voice grated Sasuke’s ears and pulled Naruto’s attention. “Naruto, what are your thoughts on the plan for renovating the park in the center of town?”

Gritting his teeth, Sasuke was overcome with another bout of irritation toward the Kazekage. Naruto responded to his question happily, “A park for the kids would be super great! It would be really nice to give them a spot to play. It’s really important for kids to play, you know?” Of course Naruto would say that. Sasuke thought it was dumb to even ask him such a question, because obviously that would be his answer. It would be out of character for Naruto to argue against something so pure, so obviously he’d be for it. Why did Gaara need Naruto’s opinion on this matter, anyway? Naruto was not a Suna ninja. What was Gaara playing at with such a question, interrupting them from… whatever they had been doing before.

Temari refuted Naruto’s point. “The cost of redoing the park isn’t warranted. The kids already have a park to play in. We have so much more right now that has to take priority. The money should go to a different issue that’s more substantial than a playground.”

Grumbling for a moment, Naruto frowned, “The playground they have looks rusty, and it’s hardly more than a slide and a couple of swings. Kids need more than that! It’s important for them to have a playground!”

Temari clicked her tongue at this. “Not more important than revamping our border patrol.” Her response was downright infuriating to listen to; Naruto’s points, though ineloquent, were right.

He hadn’t expected Gaara to then turn to him, next. “What do you think?”

Sasuke blinked at him. Was he serious? He had half of a mind to ignore him, so blatantly pretending like he wanted to hear Sasuke’s opinion. But with Naruto here… Sasuke sighed. It didn’t matter if Naruto was here. He didn’t like it. “What does it matter what I think? Do whatever you want.”

“I want to know your opinion on it.” Damn him.

Fuck it. He sighed in annoyance. “If you have enough money to fund all of this construction, you can throw a few coins into investing in the wellbeing of the village’s future. Give them someplace normal to play on instead of battlefields.”

“Yeah!” Naruto agreed, enthusiastically clenching his fist. “Kids are the future of your village! Playgrounds are where they can form bonds with each other! That’s like, one of the most important things, isn’t it?” There. All he needed to do was form Naruto’s amassing concepts into a solid idea for him. Really, the others should have been able to see what he was trying to get at without Sasuke having to spell it out for them. “You guys have plenty of money right now, and I can’t think of a more worthy thing to spend it on than giving kids a place to make a community together.”

“I think I’ll do it, then,” Gaara said, and Sasuke did his best to not raise his hackles.

Sighing, Temari shrugged, “I guess it’s not a bad idea, even though I think it’s more worthwhile for the kids if we spent the money on their education.” Then, she elbowed Naruto’s side hard enough to make him yelp, “You’ll help me draft a proposal when we get back to the office.”

Wailing, Naruto put his head in his hands, “Not more paperwork!” She sniggered at him, but it was short lived, because Naruto lifted up again and righteously put his fist in his palm. “Not tonight! I have plans tonight!”

She squinted at him. “Plans?”

“Sasuke and I always train on Friday nights!” he nodded, and Sasuke kept his expression neutral.

Kankuro shook his head, “You can’t just dip out on this job without putting in a request off first.” Naruto made a gagging noise at this, apparently unaware of such customs of a stable job. “And honestly, what could *you two* possibly need more training for?”

At this, Naruto grinned widely, “We’ve got a cool new jutsu we’re working on together!”

“Naruto,” Sasuke interrupted before the idiot said too much. Really, what was the point of developing this innovative jutsu if he was going to blabber its details to everyone around

him? It was bad enough that Orochimaru was aware of what they were doing. Who knew who any of these other patrons were that might have been eavesdropping?

“Right!” Naruto barked, holding a finger up to his lips. “You’ll just have to see us in battle to find out what it is!”

Kankuro’s face grew uneasy, but it was Gaara that said, “We’re in a time of peace right now. We hopefully won’t have to see you use it for a long time.” At this, Naruto gave Gaara one of those smiles- the close-mouthed ones, not unlike the one Sasuke had earned minutes ago. Sasuke lip twitched once more. The longer it dragged on, the more restless he felt. Under the table, the foot of his crossed leg began to bounce, trying to release the energy. It wasn’t working.

Then, without meaning to, he bumped the foot into Naruto’s calf. It was a subconscious thing, but as soon as his shoe made contact, he felt the strange agitation subside. So he kept it there. His left leg, crossed over his right, hooking around Naruto’s left calf. Somehow, even though it was hidden out of view of the other three, it felt like a substantial wall blocking them off. The touch made Naruto finally stop grinning over at Gaara, Sasuke successfully winning his attention. Blue eyes fluttered a few times, a mild question in the slight cock of his head. Shit. Sasuke dropped his eyes back down to his broth, calmly collecting another mouthful. Thankfully, Naruto did not make any other facial reaction, and turned back to whatever Temari was saying.

Under the table, Sasuke felt Naruto’s leg lean further into the touch.

_o-O-o_

To Sasuke’s relief, Gaara had overrode his siblings’ insistence on Naruto returning to the office again for the night. This was good, because it meant Sasuke didn’t have to waste time and effort to sneak him out like he had planned on. Unfortunately, however, all it had taken Gaara was the slightest mention of the words ‘training’ and ‘fun’ before Naruto was inviting the three of them along. Naruto and his annoying extroverted tendencies. Whatever.

Sunagakure didn’t have much in terms of training fields, but they did have kilometers of barren desert. The heat Sasuke had travelled in earlier when the sun was up had depleted, so it was pleasantly cool. On instinct, he checked the surrounding areas to survey the terrain for anything that could possibly give him a leg up. He clocked every tumble weed and cactus that could end up coming in handy. There was too much sand for his liking.

“So what are we doing?” Kankuro set the puppet he had down on the dusty ground with a puff of sand.

“Well, we usually spar,” Naruto said with a pursed bottom lip. Sasuke anticipated his next proposal, and sure enough his excitement took over. “Hey! What do you say we do some team sparring? Konoha versus Suna!”

Sasuke’s instinct to argue that he wasn’t Konoha died on his tongue; it wasn’t the time to riff with Naruto again about that. He also certainly didn’t want to suggest any other team pairings. Temari scoffed, though she was wearing a smirk. “Three on two, huh? Isn’t that a

bit unfair?" Sasuke wanted to roll his eyes; her insinuating that they wouldn't need that particular handicap was rich.

Baring a toothy grin, Naruto chuckled, "Well, if you wanted to invite a few more teammates to your party to level the playing field, I wouldn't hold it against you."

"Bold words from two genins," Kankuro baited, which wouldn't work on Sasuke, who had never put any weight into the arbitrary titles of the ninja system to begin with.

On Naruto, however. "OI! Just because I haven't taken the Chunin exams since we were twelve doesn't mean I'm not at Jonin level! And I'm taking them again in a few weeks, so you won't be able to say that for long!"

Shrugging, Temari taunted him, "You're still a genin. Do you think you can fare well against two jonin and a Kage?"

Sasuke was exhausted already, but Naruto only grew more riled. His chakra was practically seeping from him like a roaring housefire. Well, Naruto always fought best when he was like this, so Sasuke allowed the Suna ninja to ignite their own cremation chambers. Especially since he knew these two weren't actually so dumb as to think Naruto was weak; the war was only a year ago, and they were all present for it. "I'm still gunna be Hokage someday, so don't think you're gunna have an easy time taking us on!"

Both Temari and Kankuro both looked as if they were about to fuel him farther. "That's enough," Gaara scolded, reeling his pets back to his side. Arms crossed over his chest, he droned on, "We should get started, but first I want a moment to talk to my team."

His blood already thoroughly pumped, Naruto goaded with a wry smile, "Sure, you can have that handicap, too." Temari rolled her eyes at this and Kankuro scoffed, but then a ball of sand encompassed the three of them to give them privacy to talk tactics.

Once the other three were closed off, Sasuke shook his head, "Don't underestimate them."

"Of course I won't," Naruto chuckled, his hands carelessly behind his head. "But I'm not gunna underestimate us, either."

There was a soft edge to the way he said it, and he gave him that smile again. Sasuke closed his eyes before the full effect distracted him too much. "We're not going to use that jutsu here."

Immediately, Naruto was whining, "What? Why not?!"

"We haven't perfected it yet; it's too dangerous for us to use it in such a pointless spar," he excused, pointedly not stating his real reason: that he didn't want anyone else to know what they had created. That word could too easily travel, and Orochimaru had ears everywhere. "Besides, we shouldn't need it. I'm confident that my Chidori is still strong enough to break Gaara's shield, and so is your Rasengan. And we're both fast enough to block the others' attack. I think our best bet would be to-"

“Stop!” Naruto interrupted him, and Sasuke furrowed his brows. “I don’t want to strategize for this. Or at least not out loud. I kinda want to see how we do without it.” It didn’t take much analyzing for Sasuke to understand what Naruto meant. Don’t discuss it out loud. See how they fight together without communication; see how strongly their team holds up based on the bond alone. He remembered what it felt like during the war to fight alongside Naruto again. How he knew when Naruto was going to move, and which direction he wanted Sasuke to follow his lead with. Those were the moments that had been most exhilarating for them.

His Sharingan flickered toward the slight glimmer of chakra laying itself on the thinnest of strands outward from the sand dome. Kankuro was already setting his traps, as Sasuke suspected he would. Naruto couldn’t see them, which meant Sasuke would have to keep an eye out for him the whole time. But he had to know that Kankuro was going to use this jutsu, and Naruto could substitute himself with a clone in the blink of an eye.

Which he just did, and Sasuke could only tell by the slight difference in the chakra level. The clone winked at him.

The battle started predictably as soon as the dome released itself, one blast of Temari’s fan separating him and Naruto’s clone. Her wind could be deadly at the pressure she manipulated it with, which gave Sasuke an idea as to how hard these three were willing to go for a simple spar. The gust would have had him landing on one of the chakra threads; to avoid this, he pierced his blade into the ground beside it to balance there instead.

Naruto was already charging in, so Sasuke assessed that he should stay midrange. Normally he would have avoided this position with this bunch that specialized in midrange attacks. But as it was, Naruto was plenty for them to deal with at hand-to-hand for them to lose focus on him here. He would keep to long-range, but he needed to be close enough to see- he threw a kunai under Naruto’s foot so that he stepped on it rather than Kankuro’s chakra thread. Naruto was ready for it and used it as leverage to hop off and land a kick to the puppet. Sasuke narrowed his eyes at the puppet, willing Naruto to recognize the fact that it could stab him with poisoned needles at any time, and that would be a dumb way to waste that particular clone. But Naruto was quick, and Temari and Kankuro were nothing against his taijutsu now. The only one who would stand a chance against it would be Gaara’s Ultimate Defense, but somehow Sasuke knew…

He couldn’t imagine Gaara making any form of attack against Naruto. Not anymore. Naruto wouldn’t share the same sentiment; he loved to fight and considered fighting with his friends not only the utmost fun, but the best way to connect with them. If Naruto were to aim his attacks toward him, Gaara would do nothing but defend. Perhaps it was his guilt from their childhood, but Naruto was a weakness for him. Putting this into concrete terms was downright revolting. So what about their past? This was just a spar. He had to think about it, though, as it was an important factor of the current battle. If Gaara wasn’t going to attack Naruto, that meant-

There was sand creeping up his blade from where he sat on it still jutting straight up from the desert floor. Grasping the hilt, Sasuke sent sparks of his electricity through it, neutralizing the sand that would have been holding it hostage. He was able to twist his body to generate the

momentum he needed to launch his sword at a speed great enough, and with the help of the Chidori running through it, to impale the wall of sand Gaara had brought up to try to block it.

His lightning overpowered the earth within Gaara's sand more than the wind charka could defend it. It was enough to weaken the chakra signature laced in it so that he lost control. This was the opening that he needed to get close. If it wasn't a spar, Sasuke might have used the Rinnegan to teleport, but Gaara wasn't quick enough to notice the difference anyway, so it would have been a waste of chakra. He had to have anticipated that that was his goal, though, because he had blocked his back just in time. Even with it blocked, Sasuke was in reach enough now to be able to deal his damage-

But Naruto had caught himself in Kankuro's web, so he changed his route. He met Naruto's eye; there was something unmistakably devilish there. He must have… gotten caught on purpose. No, he didn't get caught on purpose, he let his *clone* get caught on purpose. Which meant…

His hands weaved the signs he had memorized for a decade, now modified to only need one hand. The flame in his chest brewed upward and outward, sending a large destructive ball right at his teammate's ensnared clone. The clone burst into a puff of smoke, but it happened too quickly for the others to be able to tell it had been a clone at all. Their shocked faces were a sweet sight; almost as sweet as the sight of the threads of chakra igniting along with it. As suspected, Kankuro had a natural wind element; even if the threads themselves were not wind release, they burned well enough. The flames spidered outwards along their guide, eventually leading to a hidden mass underground.

With the second puppet discovered, the real Naruto's Rasengan was at its throat before Kankuro had even a chance to use it. Kakuro let out a wail, but interestingly Naruto did not obliterate it like he should have. Instead, Naruto smiled brightly, picking it up. "Let's pretend I just destroyed this, so now you can't use it anymore!"

Sasuke clicked his tongue, but he couldn't help smiling. This spar was just a game for him, and he wasn't interested in actually being destructive and ruining his friends' property. Kankuro was all but growling. Eye twitching, he sent out new threads to collect the now voided puppet from Naruto's hand, tossing it behind them all a great distance now that it was no longer in play. "Whatever," he spat, covering up his own insecurities.

Not letting this distract him, Sasuke began laying his own twine. The battle wasn't over by a long shot, and he needed to divulge a plan. These three had been fighting together for their whole lives, and they made a smart and effective team. The weakness lay with Gaara and his inability to attack Naruto. Perhaps if pressured he would, as this was a spar and all he would need to do is encase Naruto in his sand to allude having used Sand Coffin. It would be difficult for Gaara to do such a thing, even without his weird self-inflicted complication, especially if Naruto used his Multi-Shadow Clones. Gaara couldn't distinct between the real Naruto and the clones. His hesitations to hurt Naruto would be his downfall. Sasuke would be able to handle the other two with no problem-

The moonlight above him started to go out. He had stayed still for just a moment too long, and the sand had begun to encase him. It had crept up his body, trapping his legs and then his torso and then his head. Panicking, Sasuke found a large rock on the ground with his eyes-

one of the ones he had clocked earlier. As he heard Naruto yell his name, he was suddenly in the rock's place, safely outside of the coffin of sand.

No sooner had he left did Gaara's hand clench. The rock could be heard cracking and snapping into pieces. The sound of it was deafening in Sasuke's ears, the sound of what would have been his own bones. Gaara had intended to use that, even though this was just a friendly spar. Gaara's eyes weren't quick enough to have seen him escape. Even Naruto had missed it; his wail, the one screaming his name, echoed in Sasuke's ears.

In a flash, Sasuke's knee collided with Gaara's head. The sand hadn't had time to formulate before this speed Sasuke had achieved through his whole life of training. The Kazekage's infamous sand exterior cracked, allowing the damage to actually be dealt. Gaara stumbled, only barely staying upright. Sasuke wound up his next kick, aiming for where Gaara's cheek was already fissured. The sand stopped him, but that was fine, because Gaara had looked him in the eye.

His defense against the sand was Lightning Release, so even when the sand crept around his calf, Sasuke was able to nullify it by emitting the lightning through his skin. Purposefully, Sasuke aimed a direct attack with his left arm to Gaara's forehead. The arm was instantly coffined, sand travelling up to his forearm. Sasuke could see an echo of that old Gaara, the one drenched in bloodlust, in the wicked green eye. And then Sasuke's left arm was crushed, blood spurting over the pair of them.

Naruto screamed Gaara's name, agony and anger ringing out in the desert. This close, Sasuke had a direct view of the horror-stricken expression he had worked so hard to earn. Gaara having broken their silent vow to never let Naruto see their mutual hatred, having done irreversible damage to Naruto's best friend, the sound of Naruto's broken trust in him rattling his bones.

And then Sasuke dropped the genjutsu.

The mass of crushed sand was between them where Sasuke's left arm would have been, if Sasuke had had one of those to begin with. There was no blood, because there had been no arm to crush. Sasuke did not like to use genjutsu as a personal preference. To him, it was the cruelest technique to use. Psychological warfare, he very well knew, was the most damaging weapon known to ninjakind. Naruto's scream had been manifested, but the sound would linger in Gaara's head for years.

Because of this, Sasuke allowed Gaara to come back into his right state of mind. Sasuke wasn't so petty that he would take advantage of his torment like that. The fact that he *could* if he wanted to would go without saying, and Gaara would realize that in time.

He underestimated Gaara's hatred of him; Sasuke had expected the mental attack to subdue him greatly, but it wasn't great enough for him to not deck his jaw with hardened sand. Sasuke took the blow and let it carry him to minimize the damage. Well, if he was going to continue on like this, then so be it. Following suit, Sasuke exerted his chakra into his speed. He would need it for every hit to be faster than the sand that moved on its own to protect its master. Even though Gaara was now attacking him with vigor, Sasuke knew he would be safe from the Sand Coffin; the illusion was too fresh.

Likewise, Sasuke knew all he needed was a well-placed Chidori to end it, but Sasuke had his end of the silent vow to hold up as well. This was all but a friendly game. It was both of their jobs to not dismantle Naruto's illusion like that. He was too precious to them both to hurt him in such a way; if the illusion were to break, it would be both of their faults.

But that wasn't going to stop him from showing the Kazekage that if that real battle between them had happened, the one Sasuke had needed to achieve his goal, he would have won. Naruto was the only thing that protected him from that fate. He was fast enough to land his hits before Gaara's sand could stop him, he had Fire Style to combat the Wind in his Sand Style, and Lightning to combat the Earth. Gaara had no defense against genjutsu anymore, not since he lost his bijuu. Even if he still had the Ichibi, Sasuke's Sharingan would be able to control it. Sasuke could escape his sand coffin before it could close on him so long as his Rinnegan was unobstructed. Even in the matter of defense, Sasuke had his Susanoo, which overshadowed Gaara's sand. With no doubt, Sasuke knew he would have won that battle.

Even now, with just the use of taijutsu alone Gaara could hardly keep up with him. Sure, Gaara managed to get a few rock pellets into Sasuke's shoulder, but that was nothing to the dismantling Sasuke had done to Gaara's outer shell. He remembered all too well, after all, being the first person to make Gaara bleed, and that was back when Gaara had been at his most dangerous. Gaara might have been kilometers better than he was back then, even with having lost being a jinchuuriki, but comparatively Sasuke was lightyears.

And it wasn't until Temari's blatant, blasé, "Gaara," that either of them remembered where they were.

Sasuke's hand froze in place, positioned in the way it would have been if there was lightning flowing through it. Gaara's sand stood just as still. They both turned to the other three, who were all standing calmly a short distance away, having stopped fighting at some point while Sasuke and Gaara were distracted with each other.

Shit, Sasuke cursed to himself. Naruto had his eyebrow raised at them. How long had they been watching them go at each other like this? That didn't matter- both he and Gaara had lost themselves in what they were supposed to be displaying as a friendly spar. They had both failed to keep their personal feelings locked in front of Naruto. Desperate, Sasuke clenched his jaw, finally feeling the sting of the bleeding spots on his right shoulder, where he had been pierced by the rock pellets. "We were having fun," he attempted, keeping his back to the damn Kazekage and walking forward toward Naruto.

"So much fun that you missed your cue in our combo that we agreed upon," Temari scolded her youngest brother. Sasuke could see it in her eyes; she was not unaware of the silent agreement. She was an astute woman. She knew the importance of Naruto for her brother, and possibly could equate the same intuition about Sasuke. He didn't want to owe her anything, but it was a good thing she interrupted them before they mauled each other too badly.

"Sorry," Gaara said, and he sounded as unaffected as ever.

His damn nerves squirmed low in his stomach as he forced himself to catch Naruto's eye. Thankfully, he smiled back. "I thought you were going to bring Gaara closer so we could

attack them all at once."

Scoffing, Sasuke let himself breathe again, thankful that Naruto didn't seem to have dwelled too much on the severity of their punches. "It was harder than it looked." He had that goal in mind originally. But then Gaara had tried to crush him in front of Naruto. If anything, at least he and Naruto had been on the same page for the majority of the battle.

Then Naruto leaned around Sasuke to say to Gaara, "I really thought you were going to crush him for a second there!"

He had sounded so carefree about it that both Sasuke and Gaara cringed. Sasuke glared toward the Kazekage, thinking that he had better come up with a good excuse. It was *his* fault, after all. "If I didn't attack with the intent to seriously hurt him, I wouldn't be able to keep up with him. I wouldn't have crushed it so hard if I hadn't seen him leave." Relieved, Sasuke sighed. That was good enough. Naruto could understand that. The only issue left was if Naruto realized that Gaara couldn't possibly have the speed to notice that Sasuke had escaped his Sand Coffin when he squeezed.

With this, the group walked back to the official building. Animated from the fight, Naruto lead the others in an excited discussion about the points of the battle he found the coolest. Apparently, Kankuro and Temari put up a good fight together while Sasuke was busy not paying attention to them. He had been too focused on Gaara. Clenching his jaw, he willed the guilt that had risen to subdue. If Naruto had been in danger, would Sasuke have even noticed?

His doubts were stupid. It wasn't a real battle. Naruto was more than capable of handling himself with those two. But still, the guilt swirled. His feet worked on their own to match up with Naruto's pace, situating him directly at his side. Sasuke did not need to worry about Naruto. Or at least, not during battle. Out of battle was a different story, he thought as he tugged at Naruto's sleeve to keep him from walking into a street sign.

When they made it into the building, Naruto chirped a farewell to the other three, heading down a different hallway. Sasuke didn't hesitate to follow him, though he did catch Gaara's eye as he turned. The recklessly infuriated look on his face did not scare him for any other reason than that it was such an obvious radiation of hatred. Naruto was too empathetic for Gaara to be so careless about his emotions. Scoffing, Sasuke followed a few steps behind Naruto, reluctantly coming to terms with the fact that he and Gaara were in dire need of a meeting.

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Chapter End Notes

i love gaara so much but like sasuke at this point does not lol

13

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The glitter of sand flowing in from under the door was the last straw. Naruto had been smiling widely, his blue eyes a deep color now that he and Sasuke were alone in the guest suite he was rooming in. As always, he had been flooding the room with conversation, giving Sasuke story after story about what he had been up to. He was in such a bright mood that he barely spoke negatively about all of the paperwork he was forced to do. Sasuke knew it would only be a matter of time before one of them moved in closer; he could feel it in the way his heart was pounding while simply watching Naruto mundanely rifle through his bag.

But then the glitter caught Sasuke's eye, and whatever emotion he had been feeling was poisoned. Clenching his jaw, Sasuke muttered, "I have to do something. I'll be right back."

"Huh?" Naruto blinked at him, and Sasuke only felt more anger at Gaara for making him do this *now*.

"Just go take a bath. I'll be back in a minute," he instructed, barely able to contain his bitter resentment.

Giving him that blank look, Naruto eventually said, his voice small, "…Okay." It was worse that he still had a ghost of that former smile on his lips. Fucking Gaara, ruining Naruto's mood.

Sasuke waited until Naruto shut himself in the bathroom before yanking the door open so that he could set the trail of sand aflame without having to worry about setting its wood on fire with it. Interestingly, the sand had not formed into that Optic Nerve, even though plenty of time had passed to do it. In the hallway, Sasuke could see the trail of sand leading him in a very specific direction, the Amaterasu guiding his way along it. It was nice to know that Gaara was also aware that they needed to have a meeting.

He had half of a mind to be wary of traps, considering that he was a wanted criminal in this country, but the other half was certain that he needn't worry about that. Naruto's protection had to still be active, even if he wasn't directly next to him. The trail of sand led him to a small room. The lights were off, but there was enough moonlight coming through the window. Gaara had his arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

The black flames continued to follow their sandy trail into the room, stopping a few meters away from where the Kazekage had severed the chakra flow. The sizzle of the last grains of sand was the only noise between them, and when they extinguished, the room rang out in silence for several moments.

"I thought we agreed to keep this hidden from Naruto," Sasuke was the first to speak, his contempt barely contained.

Frustratingly, Gaara was better at staying monotone. "We also agreed to avoid each other."

Was that another silent agreement between them? Perhaps it was. “Naruto invited me,” he explained coolly, shifting his weight on his feet.

“You’ve never had a problem ignoring his invitations before.” Sasuke flashed his eyes toward the Kazekage, who put on a great act of being unaffected. Of course Sasuke knew what he was referring to. As if it was such a simple thing that could be boiled down like that, the reasons why Sasuke had avoided coming back to Konoha for so long.

It was a deep, dirty hit that Gaara managed to land on him. He had it ready and waiting, apparently. Sasuke did his best to block the dark thoughts. “Enough,” he said aloud, though he wasn’t sure if it was meant for Gaara or not. “I don’t care how you feel about me. Naruto is what’s important.”

He knew he had him with that. Naruto was just as important to Gaara. Naruto was important to a lot of people, but it was different for the two of them. They were both aware of how the other perceived him. It was just one thing that they had in common. Finally, Sasuke saw a sliver of emotion slip through Gaara’s stony exterior. “You talk as if you are trying to protect him.” He didn’t have a response; he *was* trying to protect Naruto. They both were. It would be redundant to say it out loud. Surely Gaara was aware of that, so what angle was he trying to portray? “It wasn’t too long ago you were trying to kill him. And everyone else he loves-”

“I could say the same about you,” he spat the instant his anger was ignited, interrupting the tail of his sentence. Gaara’s eyes widened, and Sasuke could see that echo of the boy he used to be mingled in the circles of his irises again. That crazy bloodlust. It was very clear that Sasuke had found the core of the Kazekage’s insecurity. “It doesn’t matter what we’ve done in the past. The point is that Naruto cares about us both. If he were to find out that you wanted me locked up, how would he feel?”

The muscles at Gaara’s jaw clenched. “That’s why we haven’t had anyone searching for you. If it wasn’t for our alliance with Konoha, I would not have been able to stop my board from actively persecuting you.”

Sasuke scoffed. Like they even could. “You cannot actively persecute me. I’m not your rogue to deal with. You can’t arrest me outside of your own country.”

“We are currently inside of my village,” Gaara reminded him, which Sasuke rolled his eyes at. “As I have reminded my board many times, we cannot pursue you outside of Wind. We finally managed to stop some members from bringing it up in meetings. I cannot use that argument against them now that you are inside our walls. Our village sees you as a threat.”

What did he care what Suna’s government was up to? He made it clear, “I am uninterested with how your village perceives me.”

“Your crimes here have not been pardoned,” Gaara said briskly. “There currently isn’t anyone on staff who thinks that they should be.” The hidden meaning behind this being that it included Gaara himself, as if Sasuke had been so deluded to assume otherwise. His *crimes*? What crimes did Sasuke even commit in Wind? He joined the Akatsuki for all of five minutes, and his attack at the Kage summit wasn’t even meant for anyone other than the

Hokage. “Having you walk into our home as you please cannot be tolerated. I have let it slide so far as a courtesy to Naruto. But if you continue to stay, I will think of my village first.”

Squinting cautiously, Sasuke calculated, “If you were to do that, you would spark unrest with Konoha.”

“It would spark unrest with the Hokage,” Gaara corrected, and Sasuke was forced to concede. The village would not be upset at all if Sasuke was behind bars. As it was, they tolerated him. Most of them probably hoped for it. Whatever.

Still, Sasuke had his own artillery. “And Naruto,” he reminded.

It was Gaara’s turn to narrow his eyes. “Yes. Naruto, too. That’s why I do not want to do that. But if the time comes, my hands will be tied. Part of being a Kage is putting your village above your personal will.” *Sounds stupid*, Sasuke thought. “That’s why I’m asking you to leave before it gets to that point. I do not want to upset Naruto.”

Ah. That was a good motive. Still, Sasuke wasn’t in the mood to give in so easily. “He would only be upset with you.”

Gaara’s fist clenched, an indication of his anger puncturing his emotionless persona. He was quiet for a moment, head swirling with the notion. Naruto would not be upset at Sasuke if he was attacked by Suna. The fault would lie solely on Gaara, the Kazekage in control. A rift between Suna and Konoha would not be ideal, but if that is what the will of his people was, Gaara would comply. It was just politics. But the concept of Naruto being angry with him, personally- that was much harder for him to deal with. They both knew what would happen in that situation, who Naruto would side with and who Naruto would blame. Gaara would actively be digging the fissure between them, the gaping hole pushing Naruto closer to Sasuke at the same time. Would he put his village before Naruto like that?

He would. What an absolute moron.

At the same time, if Sasuke were to let that happen, he couldn’t imagine not being submerged in that awful, toxic guilt. Naruto liked Gaara. They were friends, precious friends. He was always talking about Gaara, always elated to do so, to be talking about another friend who understood his loneliness. Probably the person who could empathize with him the most. With a clenched jaw, Sasuke recognized that Gaara was *definitely* the person who could empathize with Naruto the most. Their shared history as jinchuuriki was not something Sasuke could ever hope to imitate. Sasuke’s loneliness was of a different breed. Naruto deserved to have someone to relate to on that level.

His resolve to fight it faded. He did not want Naruto to lose a friend because of him. He didn’t care about Gaara or fucking Suna a shred. Even now, watching Gaara’s silence and seeing his pain and insecurity, he didn’t care. In fact, he deserved it. Gaara would choose his country over Naruto, and that was despicable. But at the end of it all, Naruto was what was important to Sasuke, and Gaara was important to Naruto. Sasuke would not come between that. “I’ll leave in the morning,” he caved. The room felt like it was getting smaller, so he turned on his heel and found the hallway again, not caring to see the muted reaction Gaara must have given.

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Naruto was just getting out of the bath when Sasuke returned. He had a towel around his hips while another one was tossing his blond spikes. Seeing him so naked was a lot to look at, jumbling his brain in the most confusing way, especially considering how somber it had been moments before. Of course, Naruto was completely unaffected by it and smiled as usual. “Hey! Everything okay?”

There wasn’t much Sasuke could do but avert his eyes and affirmatively grunt, “Yeah.”

“Good,” he sighed, and his animated expressions as he dropped his shoulders were such a stark opposite from Sasuke’s last conversation that he felt like he had stepped into a different universe. “I was kind of afraid you and Gaara were going to kill each other or something. What did you need to talk about?”

This had Sasuke freezing on the spot. Naruto was- When had Sasuke given the impression that he had left to talk to Gaara? He had been so sure that it would have gone right over that blond head that he didn’t plan to have to come up with an alibi. It would have been easier to come up with one without this shock. “What?” was all he could respond with.

The worst part about it was how factually he said it, one finger pointing at the door. “You went to go talk to Gaara, right?”

“H-How did you-?” Sasuke floundered.

Naruto clicked his tongue, pouting his lips, “Who else would you need to talk to?” That was a good point, but Sasuke had never mentioned that he was leaving to talk to anyone to begin with. He would probably have come up with an alibi that had more to do with going somewhere to… collect something? If he had been able to come up with something in time, he’d have been able to quell Naruto’s assumptions. But nothing came to mind, and Naruto had already moved on with what he knew was the truth. “I was a bit worried you might have gone to intimidate him or something. I know you don’t really like him.”

“Wh-What makes you think that?!” Sasuke flustered too loudly.

Naruto’s eyes squinted, and he gave an almost pained frown, “You don’t like anyone.”

Right. Scoffing, Sasuke bit his tongue, willing it to work. “He’s fine.” At Naruto’s raised eyebrow, Sasuke knew he couldn’t deny it any longer. Of all of the things for Naruto to see through. But he still had to protect him from as much as he could. “He wanted to talk to me, so I went to hear what he had to say.”

With the way Naruto was looking at him, that almost cartoonish scrutinizing expression, Sasuke had pulled up blanks for every excuse. He couldn’t adequately prepare for the question he knew was coming. When Naruto finally asked, “What did he have to say?” Sasuke had to suppress a grimace.

“Kazekage stuff,” he managed to settle on because it wasn’t a lie. Knowing that this wouldn’t placate Naruto’s curiosity, he scoffed, “Boring stuff. You don’t need to worry about it.” With

bated breath, Sasuke let the moment tick by, hankering on Naruto's reaction. He was hoping Naruto had been scarred enough this week by how *boring* working under the Kazekage was that he'd lose interest in the details. Sure enough, there was a pained furrow to the blond eyebrows at the mention. But the quizzical look in his eye contradicted Sasuke's relief. Before the moment lasted too long and Naruto continued, Sasuke feigned flippancy, brushing past his unasked questions into the bathroom. "I'm taking a bath," he explained, closing the door of both the room and the conversation.

With the privacy of the bathroom, Sasuke could let himself breathe, wondering if exiting the situation was the right move or not. On one hand, he needed Naruto to think that whatever conversation he and Gaara had was insubstantial, and staying to flounder for an excuse could have to easily revealed him. On the other, it might have made Naruto more suspicious. Damn it. If only Naruto hadn't been- well. *Naked*. Then Sasuke's brain would have been able to work properly. He should have said it was about some stupid land reform thing from the beginning! If he had started with that, Naruto would have been too disinterested to see past it. Fucking Naruto and his stupid fucking distracting chest.

He stewed in his bath for quite a while before he was ready to get out. It gave him time to detail a good alibi. Prison reform was his best justification for the way he reacted. Gaara wanted to talk to him about prison reform, which was awkward enough that it explained why Sasuke didn't want to talk about it. It wasn't too out-of-character for Gaara to want to talk to him about, considering he had asked his opinion on the park during dinner, and Sasuke had once been in prison. That would have to do. Naruto wouldn't want to drill him on details for that conversation. Sasuke aligned his sentences in preparation, ready to face what he was sure was going to be another interrogation.

When he left the bathroom, however, the conversation never came. Naruto was laying on his back on the bed, hands folded under his head and lazily blinking up at the ceiling. Sasuke's entrance had caught his attention, but all he said was, "I brought your pajamas. They're in my bag."

So Sasuke collected the clothes and went back into the bathroom to change, his thoughts racing. Had he already dropped the conversation so easily? Was he even going to bring it back up? Surely he was just waiting for them to get in bed, right? That had to be it. He was going to wait until they were both laying down before subtly bringing it back up again.

He didn't. The bed was against the wall, but Sasuke always slept on Naruto's left, so he had to climb in from the foot of the bed and wedge himself in the narrow space. This bed was smaller than Naruto's. Not that it mattered much, because he knew it was always a matter of time before they would be entwined into one entity while they slept. But it did make him feel a little claustrophobic, all things considered, waiting for Naruto to start talking.

Naruto's head was on his chest only seconds after Sasuke settled in. He would have preferred a different position, one that allowed him to conceal his heartbeat thundering against his ribcage. If Naruto noticed, he didn't say anything. Instead, he mumbled near incoherent against Sasuke's body, "Thanks for coming."

And with that, Sasuke had a flash of resentment toward the Kazekage. Naruto *wanted* Sasuke here. If he so easily chose to deprive him of such things, then it was clear to see who cared

more for him. Pursing his lips, he replied just as quietly, “You wanted me here.”

At this, Naruto didn’t respond verbally. Instead, Sasuke felt Naruto’s hug around him tighten from all points of contact. His arms, his legs, he even nuzzled his face into Sasuke’s chest deeper. This bed wasn’t comfortable at all, but Naruto’s weight on him brought him some solace of drowsiness. He thought that he might be able to actually sleep like this, with Naruto on top of him. If he wasn’t going to hound him for more information about Gaara’s conversation, then he could let himself relax and enjoy the closeness. Without realizing it, he had begun to trail his fingertips along Naruto’s back. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly.

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It did take a while to fall asleep, but not as long as he was used to. With his mind working through the events of the night, Gaara’s cold glare and Naruto’s dangerous curiosity, his anxieties eventually morphed into dreams. They weren’t pleasant dreams at all. All three Suna ninja made an appearance. Naruto was encased in sand, screaming wildly to be let out. Temari had slapped down the stack of paperwork onto Sasuke while he panicked about trying to get Naruto out, but Kankuro’s strings were forcing him to complete paper after paper filled with a strange language written in bizarre characters. Eventually Naruto wasn’t screaming anymore, and Gaara was inside the sand coffin with him, Sasuke hammering on the outside, trying to dig his way through the hardened casing with his bare fingernails. His fingertips quickly ripped themselves apart on it, and then Sasuke’s entire body was cut open and raw. Itachi was telling him to stop trying.

He woke up suddenly, but not for any reason in the dream. The room was still dark, which meant he had only been asleep for a few hours at most. With the body thrashing on top of him, it was evident why he had been forced to wake so suddenly.

Naruto was still on his chest, but his limbs were flailing in staccato, his skin damp. It seemed Naruto was also suffering from similar nighttime ails as Sasuke. It was troublesome to watch; the staggered breathing gave him an uneasy feeling, but not as uneasy as seeing how prominent the marks on his cheeks were. It should have been too dark for how noticeable they were.

Carefully, Sasuke threaded his fingers into Naruto’s hair, putting a firm palm against his scalp. Naruto struggled against it, but Sasuke was strong enough to keep him in place. He didn’t want him to hurt himself in the shock of waking up. “Naruto,” he called into the sound of labored breathing. A quick knee slammed into Sasuke’s leg, and he had a hunch that there was already a bruise there beforehand, probably from a similar motion Naruto had made in his sleep. There definitely would be now, if there hadn’t been. He pinned the restless leg down with his own and called louder, “Naruto.”

With a gasp, Naruto woke. It was a good thing that Sasuke had a sufficient hold on him, because with the way he flinched, it was definite he would have thrown himself off of the bed without it. He kept the hold tightly for a while, not wanting to let go just yet even though he knew it was unneeded now that Naruto was awake. He was still breathing hard, and Sasuke could feel Naruto’s pulse all but vibrating against his skin. It was only when Naruto pulled back gently, a conscious movement, that Sasuke released his grip. With the prominent marks

on his cheeks, Sasuke had expected the slitted pupils, but it was still worrisome to see them stare up at him.

Eventually, the physical signs of Naruto's fear faded. His body slumped into Sasuke's, letting go of the tension in his muscles all at once. Still catching his breath, Naruto once again let his head fall back on Sasuke's chest. "Sorry," he mumbled. "'Didn't mean to wake you."

"'S fine," Sasuke breathed, unlocking the hold he had on the rest of Naruto's body.

"I usually don't get them unless I'm not sleeping in my own bed," he explained about the nightmare, his voice thick with exhaustion. "I used to get them all the time, but then Tsunade baa-chan made me my mattress. It's really comfy, and I think there's some jutsu she put on it to help get rid of bad dreams, but she says she didn't. 'Think she's lying. She's gotta be. She might be a witch or something. Wish I brought it with me." He wasn't making the most sense, and his voice was muffled against Sasuke's chest. Sasuke wondered if he was already falling back asleep. "You know how it is. 'T's comfy. 'Know that's why you always visit me."

At this, Sasuke startled. He hadn't been exceptionally tired just prior, but that last sentence had him wide awake. "What?" he spat.

"You only visit me 'cuz my bed is comfy," he continued to mumble, and Sasuke's eyes went wide in the dark. "'S'okay. I get it. I don't mind, 's long as you come 'round. Wish I had it now for you. 'Cuz you don't sleep either, right? 'Nd we could kiss on it."

And then he was snoring. Well that was- something. Naruto was too out-of-it to have been embellishing any of that. Sasuke wondered what specific moment had made it evident that he was weak for a damn mattress. What was more troubling was the underlying reveal that Naruto thought he only visited because of it. With Naruto snoring, he knew his breath would be wasted on the words. He said them anyway. "That's not the only reason I come see you…"

It must have been the vibration of Sasuke's noise, because Naruto unconsciously buried himself in deeper into Sasuke's body. Sasuke envied him for being able to fall asleep so quickly, especially after what had to have been a pretty bad nightmare. He wondered if Naruto was so used to them, like Sasuke was, that he had become adept at separating them from reality as soon as he woke up. Perhaps, prior to having the mattress, Naruto had also had trouble being asleep for more than a few hours because of them. Sasuke hadn't witnessed Naruto having a nightmare before, but they had only ever slept together on that mattress. Which had been made by Tsunade specifically to help him sleep better, because of course it was. That explained just about every mystery about it. Sasuke's sleeps on it were usually dreamless, the few dreams he did have being more disorienting than fear-inducing. He pondered idly, slightly amused, about Naruto's sleep-deluded brain having called her a 'witch'. Having witnessed the mattress's comfort, he had to admit that he could see Naruto's thought pattern there.

He wondered what type of nightmares haunted Naruto for a moment, but quickly pushed those curiosities aside. Naruto had always had a hard life, having seen a lot of blood. Most shinobis had. They trade their own sleep, their health and sanity for… what? The betterment of their country? Fight for their village for justice against other countries, so that the other

countries could claim their own fighting just as righteous? Sasuke fought for himself because he had to. There was no other option ever presented to him in this world of blood and battle. He was left with nightmares, and so was Naruto.

Sasuke could circle with such thoughts for hours. The more he thought about it the angrier he got, the bruises on his legs from where Naruto had unconsciously kneed him stinging. Naruto knew this pain. Naruto saw it in others long before Sasuke ever did. Naruto had already brought those feuding countries into alliance, had always been good at bringing everyone together. Naruto was going to be Hokage.

"You're the only hope I have left," he found himself saying out into the solitude of the night, Naruto's sleeping body the only witness. It was a fact, he knew, but it was still daunting to voice something so close to his emotions. He found that he felt safer with it out there, a practice sentence that maybe one day he'd be able to say when Naruto was awake to hear it. It was silly, because it wasn't exactly a hidden fact at all. He just hadn't seen a reason to be so blunt about it before. But it was nice, he realized, having put it into actual words. He doubted Naruto was deliberately aware of such a sentiment, and he didn't want to make him second-guess himself with it, so for now it was okay that Naruto hadn't actually heard it.

A hand cupped his cheek, and Sasuke didn't make sense of it until too late. There were lips on his, a simple butterfly-peck that lingered in every corner of Sasuke's body.

Apparently, Naruto had not been asleep yet.

_o-O-o_

Sasuke left in the morning, and thankfully Naruto did not seem disappointed or surprised. It was only recently that Sasuke had been staying longer than just the night, after all, and it wasn't like Naruto currently had the freedom to spend the day with him anyway. He was careful to leave before Temari could barge into the room to find them curled around each other. He collected himself in the early morning, Naruto lazily chatting at him from the bed. It was a bit overwhelming, the way he was constantly watching Sasuke as he mundanely slipped his shoes on. Mainly because the memory of the kiss was too fresh.

After the kiss, Sasuke had not really fallen asleep at all. It had made him a bit embarrassed, to be honest. Something about it felt too different than the others. It wasn't sleep, but he had been able to snooze, and it was nice to at least be resting with Naruto's warmth against him. Naruto had passed out almost immediately after, but Sasuke contended that maybe he wasn't so good at knowing if he was actually unconscious or not.

With the memory of that kiss plaguing him, something in Sasuke was eager to repeat it, but he had never considered something so disconcerting as kissing Naruto goodbye before. He never understood the point, as he never did with any type of kiss. Goodbyes in general were awkward enough, and he preferred to slip out without notice from any situation he was in. Perhaps it had more to do with just wanting to kiss Naruto again than wanting to say goodbye. He would be visiting the other dimensions the upcoming week, having put off going back for long enough now. With the time difference, he knew that he'd be gone for a lot longer than he wanted to, even if Naruto would not notice any difference on his end.

There was also the fact that Naruto would still be here in Suna next week, and he had just conceded that he shouldn't be seen milling around publicly anymore.

He'd have to come in secret, then. Out of the corner of his eye, Sasuke studied Naruto on the bed. He was on his side, one leg perched up while he idly fiddled with the blankets. It would be a bit of a task to come in secret next week. Not getting into the building, obviously. That would be the easy part. But doing so in a way that was kept a secret from the Kazekage while not making it obvious to Naruto that it was a secret. Perhaps he really shouldn't come…

If that was the case, he wouldn't see Naruto for what could have potentially been a month on his end. Clenching his jaw, Sasuke lingered in the doorway. He wanted to leave through the window, like he always did back in Naruto's apartment. Not caring about the rudeness of walking through this particular room with his shoes on, he made his way slowly over to the far end, passing the bed on the way. At some point, Naruto's chatter had died down.

Fuck it, he thought to himself. It was just a dumb kiss. Leaning over the bed, Sasuke pressed their lips together, a breath of relief leaving him on the way. Naruto had jolted, the rest of his body going stiff, but his mouth thankfully remaining pliant. Right- that stupid reaction he had when Sasuke kissed him out of nowhere. He could feel Naruto's heart vibrating even from the distance. Well, he'd get over it soon enough. Sasuke let himself enjoy the electricity for another moment before pulling back.

Or *tried* to pull back. Because Naruto had his fist balled into the clothes at Sasuke's front, preventing him from leaving. Instead, Naruto surged forward, taking advantage of the way his jaw dropped in surprise to deepen the kiss. Head whirling, Sasuke let it happen, unable to do anything but.

Eventually Naruto fell back, his pupils blown, though not yet slitted. It was this sight more than the kiss that had him breathless. Even though he hadn't put up any kind of resistance about Sasuke's departure before, Naruto pursed his lips, "You sure you have to leave right now?" His face was bright red as he said it, a bizarre restless energy as he tapped his finger to his chin. Tempted, Sasuke swallowed thickly, taking in Naruto's horizontal form.

But his eyes went to the door all the same. "Yes," he hissed.

Naruto followed his gaze, losing some of his coyness as he caught what Sasuke was implying. The thought of being barged in on by Temari in a few minutes was just as unappealing to him. "R-Right," he muttered, and then he wiggled a little bit on the bed, awkwardly rearranging the blankets over his lap…

Sasuke was definitely going to come back next week.

_o-O-o_

He spent the week figuring out the time differences in the other dimensions with the help of two stopwatches. One would travel with him into a realm while the other stayed in what he called the "Real Dimension". He would spend a determined amount of time with the first stopwatch before returning back to the Real Dimension, then calculate the variance in time. It

was a math problem, which Sasuke wasn't terrible at, but it had been what felt like ages since he had practice with doing such academics.

After going over his work multiple times, he thought he had it figured out. The desert dimension was nearly three times as slow, while the volcanic one was nearly two times as fast. So on and so forth he found the differences, but when he got to the blizzard realm and discovered it was a strange decimal around one and a half times as slow, he had to reconsider. If he had spent four weeks in that other dimension but only two weeks past in the real one, that should have made it twice as slow, not 1.5.

This opened the can of worms that was a headache of an algebra problem. He had previously only calculated the test for ten minutes in each dimension, getting a simple multiplication problem to factor the time difference. After a test where he spent an hour instead, he discovered the difference was actually on a sort of bell curve. Spending ten minutes in the blizzard dimension resulted in fourteen minutes passing in the real world, while after spending an hour in it he came back to the stopwatch reading an hour and twenty-five minutes. It seemed like too small of difference to matter at first, but it meant the longer he spent, the longer he would miss out in the real world; if he hadn't realized this, he could have misjudged that spending a month in the blizzard dimension would make him miss fifteen days, when he would only actually miss eleven. This would be a grave mistake to make in the volcano dimension, which rapidly would make him miss more and more time the longer he stayed. It would require a formula to get an accurate reading.

It had turned out to be much more of a headache than he anticipated. He really hadn't studied math since his early years with Orochimaru, who required him to learn physics to better his aim. Still, he was meticulous about it. He needed to understand this power and these dimensions and make sure they wouldn't get the better of him. At least it gave him ample downtime to replenish his chakra.

He was careful to not spend too much time in each realm, staying close to a village just inside the border of River to be certain he wasn't missing too much time in the real dimension. After all, he did not want to miss next Friday.

Friday morning, real world time, he set back out into the desert. He might have gotten a bit antsy toward the end of the week and intentionally chose to sit for a bit of time in the volcanic dimension, as unpleasant as it was, just to pass the time quicker. Even with how careful he was to not waste too much time, he hadn't wanted to return as late as he did. He contended that he needed to be even more careful with that realm, specifically.

Arriving at Suna late, Sasuke assumed he would find Naruto in his room at this hour, but he wasn't. It was nearing midnight, and while back in Konoha Naruto could be found awake this late, he didn't think he'd be out at this time of night here where Temari would wake him at the crack of dawn. Worried for a moment that Naruto might have switched rooms, or maybe gone home already, Sasuke kept checking that Naruto's bag was still situated on top of the dresser, as if it would somehow disappear. He waited for another hour.

When the door opened, Sasuke hid against the wall just in case. Thankfully, Naruto entered alone. Just as Sasuke was about to reveal himself as present, Naruto shucked off his jacket and he forgot what he was doing for a moment. It wasn't until he yanked his undershirt over

his head that Sasuke figured he should probably speak up before the other body in the room became completely naked. “Naruto,” he called.

Naruto jumped violently with a loud yelp; perhaps Sasuke had hid himself too well, but it still said something about how poor of a ninja Naruto was to be so oblivious. A ninja needed to be aware of danger at all times. Naruto had his shirt up guarding his naked chest, hardly dropping it when he gasped, “…Sasuke?”

Raising an eyebrow at his strange greeting, Sasuke frowned, “What.”

“Nothing,” Naruto said too quickly, but it was a bit suspicious. “You just… should have warned me sooner that you were there.”

With the click of his tongue, Sasuke nagged, “You should have noticed me yourself.”

With a jutted lip, Naruto muttered, “I didn’t really expect you to be here.”

“Of course I would be,” he stated airily in response.

At this, he watched Naruto pause. Peculiar. It was Friday, after all. There was a concerning nature to the expression- almost like Naruto was sad. Before Sasuke could decipher it, though, Naruto dropped it, suddenly smiling at him instead, but it felt strangely hollow. “Right!”

The attempt at change in emotions was too suspicious for Sasuke. “Where were you?” he found himself asking.

“Oh,” and then a hand was behind Naruto’s head, running against his own blond spikes. “Gaara and I were talking.”

Gaara. At the name, a dark, hot surge burst in his chest. His jaw felt tight. Giving a noncommittal grunt, Sasuke fell victim to the possibilities of what those two could possibly have been talking about. Certainly they were friends, so of course they had to discuss things eventually, as that was a common thing to do in friendships. What could Gaara conceivably offer for decent conversation, though? He wasn’t the idle chit-chat type. Probably something Kage related, or… The hot anger bubbled in him, the endless awful conversations Gaara and Naruto could be having together a kind of torment. What kind of thoughts Gaara could be poisoning Naruto’s mind with.

A hand on his shoulder jolted him out of his spiral. Naruto was close, and he was smiling that close-lipped smile. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said brightly, but the underlying somberness of it was evident to Sasuke, illuminated by the bond the two of them shared.

If Sasuke followed the logic, it was glaringly apparent that Gaara had been trying to talk to Naruto about *him*. It did nothing to quell his anger. Gaara attempting to flood that blond head with- doubt? Doubt that Sasuke was reliable? Or perhaps about being a bad influence? At the very least, Naruto had to have picked up some of it; he was too relieved that Sasuke had shown up tonight, especially considering there was no reason to have been worried. Swallowing hard, Sasuke recognized how easy it would be to send that blond head spiraling

by the slightest tampering of his abandonment issues. And it wasn't like Sasuke had much on his side as a reassurance. It would be way too easy for Gaara to use that to his advantage.

Had Naruto vouched for him? He thought back to his birthday, to Naruto all but growling at that Inuzuka shinobi as he defended him. Surely, he must have. At least to an extent. Naruto was relieved to see him, but not to the degree of those other times he hadn't expected Sasuke to be there. That meant that he at least knew that Sasuke would show up tonight on some subconscious level. Maybe only because he hadn't been given the chance to overthink it, yet. He had only *just* gotten back to the solitude of his room. Had Sasuke not been here, would Gaara's words have made him spiral? Even if he *had* defended Sasuke to him during the conversation- which Sasuke still didn't completely know if he would in that situation- if he came back to his empty room, the poisonous doubt could have so easily done him in.

Sasuke was incredibly glad for his resolution to sneak here, tonight. He was almost as glad for that as he was furious at the Kazekage for attempting to fiddle with Naruto's emotions like that.

"I'm gunna go take a bath, but when I get out you gotta tell me what you did this week, okay?" Naruto bid him, squeezing his shoulder tightly before dropping it. He was so used to Sasuke's silence that he knew he wouldn't get a verbal response for that, so he simply turned toward the bathroom.

Distantly, Sasuke heard the faucet of the bath kick on. The door was cracked open, Naruto not needing the privacy quite yet as he prepared the water. He knew Sasuke would be there when he came out, so it wasn't necessary to grind him for conversation yet. If Sasuke had shown up late, or- no. Even if he had missed just a few more weeks in the past. If Sasuke had been more absent, Naruto would have sucked him dry of interaction right then and there, like how he used to do just a few months ago. He had never put it to reason before, but in the light of detangling Naruto's abandonment issues, it was clear why Naruto was the way he was. Why he filled the room at every possible minute, regardless of if others found it annoying or not; it was better to seep every amount of interaction possible out of someone before they left him alone, like they always did. But he didn't do that now. Sasuke preferred it like this. Naruto knowing that they had time, that Sasuke would be here when he got back.

How would Naruto be thinking now, in the solitude of the bath? Would he be reassured knowing Sasuke was in the other room? Or would he hurry back, the poison working on his mind to convince him he needed to rush before the inevitability of abandonment? Sasuke couldn't know, because he didn't know what those two talked about. He didn't know what kind of mind-games Gaara had managed to play on him. What manipulation tactics he nefariously implanted. Which weapons he had laid in the no-man's land that was their shared precious friend.

Naruto was supposed to be off bounds in the war between them.

Well, Sasuke had no plans of leaving. Even if they weren't at Naruto's apartment, even without the promise of a good night's rest on Naruto's perfectly crafted mattress. Sasuke was here for Naruto, because he wanted to spend time with him. The anger in his chest settled lower into his stomach, morphing into something that writhed uncomfortably. That snake.

Did Naruto know that? Last week, Sasuke had said it into the night. Naruto might have heard it, responded with a kiss, but he had been too near sleep. Did it register?

Opening the bathroom door fully, Sasuke found Naruto bending over the half-filled tub, testing the water. He was still clothed- or, well, he had pants on, which Sasuke had known he would have by the state of the un-closed door. But the bandage around his right arm was off, leaving the scarred tissue that was always hidden uncovered. Blue eyes went wide at him for a moment, one eyebrow shortly after rising in confusion. “Sasuke?” he pondered, nothing more than bemused at Sasuke’s sudden arrival.

Sasuke didn’t have the time to figure out words. As he came in closer, Naruto stood up, but it wasn’t until he was centimeters from his face with a hand holding his chin that Naruto understood that he was about to be kissed. He gasped into it, and Sasuke took advantage of the lax jaw to instantly set a deep rhythm. He couldn’t have Naruto freaking out on him, so he held the back of his head, fingers lacing into the spikes.

Still, Naruto was breathing too heavily, his hands shaking into the grip he had on the clothes at Sasuke’s sides. Sasuke wanted to delve into something faster, but he slowed himself, giving Naruto time to work through it. When the fists at his side clenched stronger and Naruto was pushing against his lips in an equal pressure, Sasuke assumed he would then speed up. Something about this slow kiss was better, though, so he didn’t.

Grabbing at his own back, Sasuke yanked his cloak. He had to break their connection to remove it, but it was a fleeting moment, and it was probably good that he was able to take a proper breath. Joining back together, Sasuke found the button at Naruto’s pants, popping it open. The bathwater was still running; it would be a shame to waste it. While at first Naruto had stiffened at Sasuke’s hand attempting to de-clothe him, he was soon assisting in its removal, which was good, because it would have been a lot of work for Sasuke to attempt on his own. Before he had even kicked his own pants the rest of the way off, Naruto was pawing at Sasuke’s clothes in turn. He was much quicker pulling them off of Sasuke’s body, shirt, then pants, and Sasuke could see why Naruto had stiffened so much. It was a bit daunting to be stripped by someone else. But he didn’t care, not really, because it was just Naruto.

He guided Naruto to the water, who seemed to have forgotten about the bath he had been drawing for himself just minutes ago, judging by the way he startled when Sasuke directed him into it. Catching the drift, Naruto let himself be dropped down into the water, both of them making sure the kiss remained intact. The tub was a bit too full, and definitely too small for the two bodies in it. Idly, Sasuke reached behind him to shut off the tap.

Water splashed over the side in the jostle of laying down, Sasuke on Naruto’s chest, but Sasuke didn’t give a shit about the people who owned this place to care about any water damage they might cause. They were cramped in like this, and Sasuke’s back wasn’t in the water and neither were Naruto’s knees, but he didn’t care- neither of them did. Naruto’s lips were as soft as ever, and the heat of the bath made them intoxicatingly warm.

He was idly aware that they were naked together, which they had never been fully before. Thinking back to how he had been so bothered by it on that night Naruto nearly fell asleep in just a towel, Sasuke registered that maybe he should have been embarrassed. He wasn’t. Why should he? It was just a bath, and they needed to be naked for a bath. That was all. Sasuke

could peek at Naruto's body, but he wasn't concerned with it. He didn't think Naruto had peeked at him. That thought might have been a bit uncomfortable, but it didn't really have a place here. Even though they were cramped in the tiny space of the tub, their hips were not together. The kiss was more important than that.

Perhaps they kissed like that for too long. The water had become tepid. Was there a length of time for kissing to be deemed too much? Sasuke wasn't sure. And regardless, he didn't care. He didn't want to stop, even though his lips became sore. Eventually they did, though, when Sasuke trailed down Naruto's neck, deep kisses turning to soft, sluggish pecks. He hadn't meant to stop, but Naruto smelled so good there. The action turned into nothing more than nuzzling, Sasuke enthralled by the comfort of being tucked away in the crook. Perhaps he could have even fallen asleep.

To think someone would choose a village.

After about ten minutes into the stillness, Naruto breathed, "Sit up," and he didn't get to find out if he could fall asleep like that. In his stupor, it took Sasuke a moment to place the meaning of the words. A hand pushed against Sasuke's chest, and Sasuke let it control him. "Turn around," Naruto instructed, his voice soft so as to not disrupt the tranquility. It was a bizarre instruction, though, so Sasuke did nothing but furrow his eyebrows until Naruto insisted, "Trust me."

And he did trust Naruto, so he twisted himself around even though he fully didn't want to. It became clear what he was doing when he guided Sasuke's head down, his face still above in the air, but his hair splaying out into the water. Then he pulled him back up into a sitting position. Sasuke panicked for a moment; from this position he could feel Naruto's length against his lower back. But it was for nothing, because Naruto didn't seem to have a plan for that. Instead, he popped open the shampoo that was on the ledge, squeezing out a dollop. Sasuke didn't have the vigor to give it the real glare it deserved, but managed nonetheless to voice what was bothering him, "That's too much."

"Shh," Naruto shushed him quickly, brushing Sasuke's nagging aside. Sasuke might have insisted further had Naruto's fingers not carded through his hair, deftly scratching against his scalp. One upward motion had Sasuke's eyes rolling to the back of his head. Then Naruto was massaging him, and Sasuke hadn't felt something so good in ages. He didn't care that the shampoo shouldn't have been left in his hair for so long, because he didn't want it to end. Naruto focused on the pressure points Sasuke hadn't even known were so tense. His temples, where continued use of the Sharingan strained his body the most. He wasn't aware of having fallen back into the other body so deeply until Naruto was instructing him to lean down into the water again, and he barely had to move.

Too soon, Sasuke was emerging back up, his body boneless with the pleasure. Well, Naruto was just washing his hair. It couldn't last forever. But Sasuke could have used another three hours of it, honestly. That was certainly a luxury he knew he shouldn't abuse-

Naruto's hands were on his shoulders, soap in hand, and Sasuke forgot all about the dangers of being spoiled. Thumbs dug into the knots behind his shoulder blades, undoing every bit of structure in Sasuke's body. He had run the bar of soap over the skin above the water, but this

action was definitely more about working away the tension, rather than cleaning. The shampooing could have been explained away, but this? This was shameless.

His mother used to do this to him. She used to dote on him after a long day of training, and as he got older Sasuke pretended like he didn't like it when she would do it for some reason. Back then he had succumbed to those incredibly unfounded childish notions to act like it was lame to have a mother who loved you; the same ones that he so detested to see in all of his peers after her death. But he did like it, even though he had still been embarrassed by it. He hadn't wanted Itachi to see him so weak. It had turned out that Itachi got the same treatment from their mother, though, and he at least had the sense to be completely unashamed by it from the beginning. But Itachi had never been diseased by those childish concepts of what was or wasn't lame.

She would coax him lovingly to relax, and she definitely saw right through his feeble stony exterior every time because he would hardly last ten seconds once she started. Likewise with Naruto. His mother's hands had always been so gentle in his youth, but Naruto's were rougher; he needed them to be, now. The stiffness he had accumulated within the past decade without his mother's gentleness required it.

All Sasuke could focus on was how it could end at any minute, this wonderful moment. There were a few spots that he hissed through, the pain he carried with him every day agitated. But he knew those were the spots that needed it the most, and he was used to pain anyway.

It didn't end shortly at all. Naruto seemed content to do this for him, completely unprompted. Sasuke couldn't make sense of why. After all, Naruto didn't really gain anything from doing this. Perhaps it was tiring his hands. Especially the one crafted from borrowed cells. But he kept going, and the water was beginning to get cold, and Sasuke was barely holding himself upright.

Perhaps it was that; Naruto had been able to tell that Sasuke was having trouble keeping himself sitting up. The wet hands trailed down his biceps before grabbing them, and he hardly even tugged before Sasuke was falling back against him again. Naruto had huffed out a laugh at him that had Sasuke pursing his lips, trying to not let the heat come into his cheeks. He had the sense again with the movement to be embarrassed at their position a bit. Sasuke's front was on display, and it was evident just how much he had enjoyed this bath. And he could very clearly feel how much Naruto did as well, pressed up between their bodies.

Once again, Naruto was ignoring that. He squeezed Sasuke's left bicep, and Sasuke flinched hard at the jolt of pain, yelping as more water splashed over the side of the tub. Instinctively he attempted to pull what he had of a left arm out of Naruto's grasp. Naruto shushed him and attempted to continue, but this time Sasuke protested the pain enough to squirm out of the hold.

Gentler, Naruto flattened his hands where he could again, one at Sasuke's shoulder and the other on his chest. "Baa-chan said that this is important to do," his voice was rough in his explanation, having been underused in the past hour and change.

“It hurts,” Sasuke slewed, sending a dirty look, even though they couldn’t see each other’s faces from this position.

“But it’ll help the phantom pain. Trust me, I know.” He lifted the reconstructed arm. Phantom pain? Naruto answered his silent question, “Your brain still thinks you have an arm, but the nerves are cut off, so it confuses the lack of feeling to the nerve with pain.” Oh. Sasuke was well aware of that bizarre phenomena. ‘Phantom’ just didn’t sound like much of a medical term. “Massaging it helps your body know that the nerves are supposed to end there. Or at least, that’s what she said. It helped me.”

He started to sound more unsure of himself as he kept talking, but it was evident it was more to do with not wanting to upset Sasuke than second-guessing his medical knowledge. So Sasuke lifted his bicep with a sigh, hoping to quell the nervousness.

Even more gingerly, Naruto took what was left of Sasuke’s limb. His fingers did little more than graze skin, but the sensation still left a sharp, jabbing pain along the scar at its tip. Further past it, the arm he didn’t have burned, truly a ghost of the incident that had disintegrated it, molecule by molecule.

A dull, red light emanated from Naruto’s hand. His red chakra seeped from his skin, encasing the scarred hand like a glove. When he touched the healing energy to the area, Sasuke couldn’t help the way he fidgeted. It did help, even though it left him breathing heavily. After a few minutes, Naruto pulled away, taking the tension of the pain with him.

Sasuke felt winded, but better. He relaxed again against Naruto, his eyelids slipping closed as if they were greedy for him to rest them. Naruto leaned his cheek against Sasuke’s head, his arms holding him tightly in place around his front. Perhaps he *could* sleep here…

“Tell me about your week,” Naruto interrupted, speaking into Sasuke’s hair.

On instinct, he scoffed, a little peeved to be denied a chance to rest, even though the idea of falling even a little asleep in a bathtub was ridiculous. But Naruto wanted to know, so he told him about the other dimensions. He managed to get partway through the explanation about the time differences before he could tell by Naruto’s uneasy responsive noises that it was going right over the blond head, which was typical. He sighed deeply into Naruto’s chest, his exasperation too much to hold onto when he was this tired. “Basically I just have to be careful to keep track of the amount of time I’m over there.”

With a deep frown on his face, Naruto pondered, “So you can use those dimensions to learn one of those jutsus that take ten years to learn in only a few years! That’s useful!”

“But my body will still have aged ten years when I come back,” he reminded curtly.

Naruto clicked his tongue, and muttered jealously to himself, “You’ll still be hotter than everyone else.” Sasuke snapped his head around, glaring at the idiot, who looked completely unabashed, only pouting.

The idea of having that kind of conversation again wasn’t ideal when Sasuke was so relaxed. “Shut up,” he demanded.

Naruto grumbled, averting his eyes now that Sasuke was facing him. He rubbed the back of his head in that signature way of his. “We should get out. The water’s getting cold, and I think you’ll probably fall asleep here if we don’t.”

Indignant, Sasuke sat upward, insisting, “I wouldn’t fall asleep.”

His hum sounded like a laugh, “I think you would.”

“Dumbass,” Sasuke called him as he turned away from the offending comment. It would be impossible for him to actually fall asleep like this. It was cramped and unconventional, and whose fault would it be if he did, anyway? Naruto had been going on as if it was his mission to try to get Sasuke to relax. His insult wasn’t exceptionally effective. Naruto laughed it off, sniggering like he so certain he was right.

When Naruto got up out of the water behind him, Sasuke’s eyes turned toward the movement on instinct before he could rationally understand how bad of an idea it was. He was quick to look away from his brazenly naked body. Bringing his own knees up to his chest, Sasuke firmly kept his eyes on the tub’s faucet.

A thick white towel was presented in front of him, pulling his focus. Naruto had a small smile on his lips as he offered the linen, which Sasuke carefully considered. Standing up without revealing himself would be a challenge. He wondered idly why it mattered; Naruto had surely seen enough of him in the bath that would render any embarrassment on Sasuke’s part moot. Eyebrow twitching, Sasuke took the presented towel.

He was still being watched. Embarrassment or not, the idea of standing up naked while being so blatantly ogled was unappealing. “Do you mind,” he slewed.

He didn’t look away. “No.”

Idiot. The towel his only weapon, Sasuke cracked it like a whip it right at the Naruto’s face, who yelped backwards to avoid it snapping his nose and ran into the sink. By the time Naruto opened his eyes again, Sasuke was out of the water and decently wrapped. It was satisfying to see him pout his disappointment. As if he hadn’t seen enough of Sasuke’s body tonight. Creep.

He had his toiletries in his cloak, which was laying on the bathroom floor from where it had been discarded. He fished out his toothbrush, and then they brushed their teeth together in silence. When they were finished, Sasuke found Naruto’s bag in the bedroom and began rifling through it for the pajamas Naruto always had for him. Part of Sasuke felt smug that Naruto had not unpacked his bag into the dresser drawers even though he had been there for two weeks already. Such an arbitrary thing, but he was still welcome to admire that detail.

They got dressed and went to bed, the cold, hard, unfamiliar mattress marring what would have been a fantastic sleep. Had this night happened at Naruto’s apartment, he might have gotten ten hours of unconsciousness. He settled with the fact that he was going to be awake for the next few hours-

A thought occurred to him. How was this mattress more uncomfortable than that cramped bathtub? Perhaps if he could recreate that feeling, he might be able to mimic that atmosphere.

He rolled over onto Naruto's chest, which was still so warm from their bath. That same heat, that same smell…

Sasuke slept the night dreamlessly on top of Naruto's chest.

_o-O-o_

"Do you want to travel back to Konoha with me on Wednesday?" Naruto asked him that question just moments before Sasuke departed the following morning. He was still lying in bed, perched on his side and watching as Sasuke collected himself.

It made Sasuke frown, "Who else are you travelling with?"

Letting out a big sigh, Naruto pursed his lips, indignant. "I was planning on going by myself, but apparently that's a dumb thing to do, so Temari and Kankuro were going to escort me. I told them I'd be fine, but they kept calling me reckless. So now they're going to take a week out of their lives making a pointless six-day round trip to Konoha, because for some reason I have to be babied." Furrowing his eyebrows, Sasuke had to accept that he should be grateful the Suna ninja were so concerned of the idiot's safety. Naruto didn't need to be babied, that was true, but he seemed unaware as to how prone he was to attracting unnecessary danger. "But if you come with me, they don't have to waste their time! I tried to tell them that you travel by yourself all the time and that it's really no big deal."

Yes, Sasuke travelled by himself all of the time, but he understood how to keep his head down and nose out of trouble. But it wasn't the time to nag him about it, especially if doing so would put him on the same level as the Kazekage and his siblings. "I guess it makes sense for me to go with you, seeing as I'll be heading in the same direction anyway," he stated.

"Great!" Naruto exclaimed, his grin extra wide on his face. "I'll see you on Wednesday morning!"

Wednesday morning. About two and a half days earlier than usual. And they'd be spending all of that time together travelling. Outside of Konoha. It wasn't a bad thought at all. He slipped his shoes on, hopping over to the window to make his exit. "I'll meet you outside of the village gates."

One last angry glare from the Kazekage wouldn't be so bad, either.

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“We have to go this way for a few kilometers,” Sasuke pointed at a diagonal. They had finally made it out of the desert, and the trees were starting to fill in thick. It was day two of their journey, and Sasuke was glad to be out of the desert for what was hopefully a long time. Sand had started to become sickening to look at. They had spent the night in a small town even dustier than Suna itself, and Sasuke couldn’t wait to find a creek to wash the granules out of his every crevice.

“North? Why do we have to go north?” Naruto rightfully questioned, and Sasuke grumbled to himself, because he would have preferred not having to explain his reasons.

He knew Naruto would be annoying if he didn’t give him an answer, so he swallowed his pride with the clench of his jaw. “Orochimaru has a hideout along the direct route between Konoha and Suna.”

Sasuke watched Naruto’s face fall flat. “North it is, then,” he agreed, the thought of running into Orochimaru just as unpleasant to him. They readjusted the direction they were running.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to avoid me, Sasuke-kun,” came a slimy voice to their right, and Sasuke’s sword was drawn instantly, his quick eyes activating to search the area. It landed upon a mass of chakra that had begun to seep out of a nearby tree. The mass was small, but growing, which was probably how Sasuke missed it in the first place. He situated his body defensively between the tree and Naruto, who would have more trouble locating the source of the voice without activating Sage mode.

Orochimaru’s body oozed grotesquely out of the trunk some ten meters away. Cursing to himself, Sasuke activated his Mangekyou; he did not want to be surprised by any movement. He began investigating the surrounding area, looking for a sign of Kabuto, finding instead that Konoha shinobi- the wood user. He was hiding dormant in a different nearby tree, perched to babysit the criminal he was assigned to. He didn’t want to rule out Kabuto, but he knew that the two spent less time at each other’s side nowadays. With the wood user in tow, and his biggest lacky nowhere to be seen, Orochimaru was not logically a threat.

That wasn’t to say the sight of him didn’t make Sasuke’s hackles rise, nor did it make him lower his sword. “What are you doing here?!” Naruto accused.

“Ah, Naruto-kun! What a delight to see you,” Orochimaru greeted brightly, such a strange friendly contrast to the slime still dripping from his body as he fully detached from the tree he had been hiding in. The tone of voice made it clear to Sasuke that he had been waiting to ambush them.

The implication of that had Sasuke’s heartrate increasing. “Why were you waiting here for us,” he demanded more than asked.

With the click of his tongue, Orochimaru smirked at the pair of them. “Not quite on the mark, Sasuke-kun. I am quite surprised to see *you* here.” It wasn’t the plural ‘you’, but the singular one. The inflection was the distinction between truth and misdirection.

Teeth grinding together, Sasuke gripped the helm of his sword until his knuckles turned white. Had Orochimaru intended to run into Naruto alone? It must have been common gossip for anyone to find out that Naruto was in Suna and when he planned to return home. Perhaps he had heard Naruto would be travelling with the Sand siblings; Sasuke was immensely grateful for them having insisted Naruto not travel alone. He shuddered at the thought of Orochimaru cornering Naruto when he was by himself.

But what could Orochimaru possibly want from Naruto? The most obvious explanation would be the Kyuubi, but Orochimaru had never been excessively interested in the bijuu. And with how he was presently leashed onto an ANBU, he couldn’t be doing something reckless like trying to capture him or start a fight. What, then? Sasuke had removed himself from under Orochimaru enough to not know what his goals were anymore. Logically, the only thing he could realistically get out of Naruto when he was so tied down would be a conversation.

Nothing that Sasuke could predict of what Orochimaru wanted from Naruto was ideal at all. Orochimaru was too heavily monitored to be researching anything dangerous or immoral so blatantly. The jutsu, then? Surely Orochimaru could be planning on trying to weasel any bit of information about it out of him. Naruto was good at many things; keeping things quiet was not one of them. That had to be it. It would be ideal for Orochimaru to get Naruto alone for a conversation, because Naruto would give him all of the information he needed with barely two seconds of goading.

Which was why it was a good thing Sasuke was here now, to keep Naruto’s lips tight. “Naruto,” Sasuke called to his friend. Naruto blinked at him. “Shut up.”

Floundering in his anger, Naruto spat, “I HAVEN’T EVEN SAID ANYTHING YET!”

“He’s here to try to get information out of you,” Sasuke explained, choosing to study Orochimaru’s carefully content expression. “If you don’t talk to him, he doesn’t get what he wants.” He turned an eye to the other ninja hiding in a tree. “He’s currently being babysat by ANBU. He can’t do anything if we just leave.”

Sighing deeply, Orochimaru shrugged, “You always think I have an ulterior motive. Can’t I enjoy a chat with friends I meet coincidentally on the road?”

Both Naruto and Sasuke grimaced in unison. “Did he just call us friends?” Naruto’s voice waivered in his disgust.

“We all did our part in the war, did we not?” Orochimaru attempted to placate.

“R-Right,” Naruto frowned, eyes squinted. He was obviously thinking about who Kabuto had learned the Edo Tensei that almost destroyed humanity from.

Cocking his head at them, Orochimaru's smile grew wider. "Though I won't pretend to be on the same friendship level as the two of you. You two seem to have gotten much closer as of late."

Their bond. This *was* about the jutsu, then. The sword Sasuke was holding out in front of the two of them grew heavier. He could feel a clammy chill on the back of his neck. Of course, Orochimaru's angle was at their bond. Clearly, he had been attempting to ambush Naruto, not with weapons, but with questions about the new jutsu they had discovered together. His last sentence echoed around in Sasuke's head: *much closer as of late*. There was absolutely no way Orochimaru could have any actual proof of how close they had gotten. That would be- no. It was impossible. Ridiculous to think that he could by some chance know-

Try as he might to calm down, Sasuke's blood was rushing past his ears, his hand starting to go numb around the hilt of the sword. No, Orochimaru couldn't know that.

"We've always *been* close," Naruto was saying indignantly, and Sasuke swallowed hard past the soreness of his throat, imploring him to shut up.

"I have no doubt," Orochimaru agreed smoothly. "I've heard word about how this is not your first lifetime together."

"So?" Naruto spat.

"*Stop talking to him*," Sasuke instructed harshly past the heartbeat in his throat, to which Naruto winced.

But Orochimaru had continued on anyway, "It didn't come as much of a surprise to me at all. Sasuke-kun always spoke of you in such an interesting way. One would think that you two were actually-"

Sasuke had not expected the wood jutsu to have been quick enough to keep up with him, but the tip of his sword, which had so quickly almost pierced Orochimaru's throat, lodged instead into a block of wood. He knew that wood nature was inherently powerful, but Sasuke had been aiming an attack at *Orochimaru*; he had put a lot of effort into that thrust. For such a blatant attack to be stopped by such a small plank of wood was definitely surprising, to say the least.

For his part, Orochimaru hadn't flinched. He seemed to know that what he had been saying was sure to spark some type of consequence. One eyebrow high on his forehead, Orochimaru smirked, "Oh?"

Sasuke didn't like removing his focus from Orochimaru when he was so physically close to him, but he couldn't ignore the ANBU slipping out of hiding. "Sasuke-kun, I must ask that you please not attack Orochimaru-sama. Orochimaru-sama is not allowed to fight unless he is in danger, and I would like to avoid that happening at all costs."

"Y-YAMATO-TAICHOU?" Naruto exclaimed.

“Hello, Naruto-kun,” the ANBU, Yamato, greeted before turning back to Sasuke. “Please remove your sword, Sasuke-kun.”

Scoffing, Sasuke pulled his sword from the block of wood, bitterly sheathing it. Well, he could at least count on Naruto being too distracted now for Orochimaru to continue with his previous conversation. Sure enough, he was too enraptured by the presence of an old captain. “Yamato! You’re here? Why didn’t you say hi sooner?”

“Sorry, Naruto- I’m working,” he apologized.

Well, it wouldn’t last like this. Orochimaru was bound to bring the conversation back around again. “Let’s go, Naruto,” he commanded, hopping back up to the tree branch Naruto was perched on, not wanting to be in Orochimaru’s presence for a second longer.

Rubbing the back of his head, Naruto nodded. “Right.”

“Well, I can see you two are in a hurry,” Orochimaru continued on, and Sasuke glared back at him. “In any case, good luck on your Chunin exams next week.”

Naruto, perturbed at the implications of Orochimaru wishing him luck on his Chunin exams considering how their last exams went with him, uttered slowly, “…Thanks…?” Sasuke did not want to be in this situation any longer. He grabbed Naruto by the wrist and focused on the farthest-away log on the ground.

They warped to its place in an instant, but it wasn’t far enough. He found a rock, and then another log, travelling this way until they were nearly five kilometers away; Sasuke was thankful the forest wasn’t too dense here. He would have gone further, as far as possible, if not for the fact that he collapsed, clutching his eye as it bled steadily down his face. Travelling this distance this way was always tiresome, but with the added body he was teleporting with…

Naruto’s hands were on his shoulders, keeping him from falling. “You okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” Sasuke brushed off, pulling himself back upright and wiping his cheek clean of blood with his sleeve. “I don’t want him following us.”

Clicking his tongue, Naruto sighed, “I don’t either. But don’t kill yourself getting us away.”

Scoffing, Sasuke stuck his nose up. “I’m fine,” he repeated, his lungs screaming at him for the way he attempted to stifle his labored breathing.

Frowning, Naruto was looking backward toward the distance they had travelled. “What do you think he meant by wishing us luck on our Chunin exams?”

Sasuke pinched his eyebrows together. “He wished *you* luck on your Chunin exams.”

“He… said it to both of us though,” Naruto sounded as confused as he was making Sasuke.

“I’m not taking the Chunin exams.”

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Sasuke had been so certain that Naruto misunderstood Orochimaru's words; surely he had only been talking to Naruto, whose status in the upcoming Chunin exams was public knowledge. The only concerning thing Sasuke could see in those parting words was that Orochimaru rarely brought topics up that had no meaning. This was what had Sasuke suspicious. He had to have been planning something, to have brought it up so brazenly. Sasuke had spent three years at Orochimaru's side; he knew how he operated. But what could he possibly be planning right under that ANBU's nose?

He didn't want to take chances. Not when Orochimaru had so clearly been targeting Naruto. Kakashi would have to be notified to increase security.

It was a bit surprising to be greeted by the Hokage at the village gate; but then again, not so much considering Naruto was the village's jinchuuriki. Good. That meant Kakashi had time. Sasuke wasted none of it, insisting, "I need to talk to you," in lieu of a greeting.

"Is that so?" Kakashi's eyebrow raised. "I was about to say the same of you. We can head back to my office, then."

This was met with groans by Naruto, who had slumped over with exhaustion from the end of the journey. "Well, *I'm* gunna go head back home and pass out."

Humming, Kakashi's eye twinkled, "I have something to say concerning you, too, Naruto. And I was going to suggest you join me for Ramen after, so that you can tell me about all that you learned in Suna."

As predicted, Naruto's energy returned tenfold, causing Sasuke's to deplete with the knowledge that he was going to be stuck eating ramen again tonight. Whatever. That was always inevitable. What was important was warning Kakashi of suspicious activity.

He hadn't thought Kakashi was the one he had to be suspicious of. When they got to the door to the office, the Hokage seemed to freeze for a moment with his hand on the doorknob. Sasuke's eyebrows furrowed as his teacher slowly turned around, a bead of sweat starting to fall down his temple. "Now, Sasuke, please don't get too mad, here." Get *too* mad? What kind of backwards plea was-

Because he knew there was no way Sasuke wouldn't get at least *moderately* mad once he saw who was inside the office. Sure enough, Sasuke's Sharingan ignited the moment the door was opened, giving him a clear view of the two people he never wanted to lay eyes on. He had done a good job of never seeing these two faces within the year since the war ended. He always knew that whatever resolve he had to not assassinate Konoha's government officials would severely crack upon seeing their faces. The despicable, genocidal faces of the two remaining Elders.

It was the first time he had seen them, but the descriptions he had been given by the man posing as Madara matched perfectly. His hand was clutching the hilt of his sword under his cloak. What could Kakashi possibly be thinking, to bring these two directly in front of him? They were hardly a few meters away from him. He could clear that distance before either of

them could blink. Milliseconds, and then all directly responsible for his clan's destruction would be eliminated. It would be too easy.

"Yes, come in, come in!" Kakashi had him by the shoulder and was pulling him inside the room, making sure to keep his body in front of Sasuke at all times. "This shouldn't take too long, Naruto, I know you're hungry."

Smart of him, Sasuke thought. To immediately situate himself in front of the two Elders, who sat behind the desk, facing Sasuke. It would, in fact, *not* be too easy to eliminate these two now that Kakashi was right there. And bringing Naruto along was part of the plan as well; Sasuke couldn't regress back into the assassin he once was in front of him. He cursed under his breath.

Behind him, Naruto let out a noise of confusion. "Who's Grandma and Grandpa?"

Kakashi's face fell, "These are the village Elders, Naruto."

"What are they doing here?" he asked, blatantly unconcerned with them in a way that Sasuke was grateful for.

"Naruto-kun, you've grown up so much," said the old man, Homura.

Naruto squinted at him. "Do I know you?"

Scoffing, Sasuke raised his voice, "They dropped you off on your own in your apartment when you were an infant."

The room went quiet at that. Sasuke was not perturbed by it. They should know that he did not want pleasant conversation with them. Seriously, how stupid were these two? First being played by Danzo like two tuneless fiddles, and then trying to contrive a meeting with the lone victim of their genocidal decisions? And to try to mediate with Naruto, whom they abandoned to a childhood of loneliness that would have destroyed a weaker person? Sasuke's rage was blinding.

"And the Uchiha boy as well; you've gotten older too, haven't you?" the woman, Koharu, spoke carefully.

"Despite your best efforts," Sasuke slewed.

"Ah, well, enough with the pleasant talk!" Kakashi interrupted wisely. "Why don't we get to the topic at hand, yes? Chunin exams!" Sasuke spared a glance at his old teacher at these puzzling words. "There seems to be an issue with this year's Chunin exams concerning you, Naruto."

Frowning, Naruto put his hands up behind his head: a position Sasuke knew to mean he was trying to show he was unconcerned. "Huh? What issue?"

Koharu spoke again, and Sasuke did his best to not growl. "It seems that you are missing a team to enter the exams with, Naruto-kun."

“T-Team?” Naruto stuttered.

“Yes, the three-man cell required to participate in the first two portions of the Chunin exams. You have taken the exams before, have you not? You understand why it would be impossible to conduct those exams solo.” Homura explained further.

Naruto’s hands were balled into fists, raised up in front of him in desperation, “B-But- I mean, come on, I can- I can do it by myself!”

Sighing, Kakashi dropped his shoulders. “With the way the exams are set up this year, you cannot do it alone. Part of the exam is testing teamwork. Normally, we have uneven teams at the start of the exams that require assigning. People who’ve had their teammates already pass the exam, for example. As it turns out this time, though, we do not. We are indivisible by three, and you did not fit well into any of the matches we had to make. It just seemed a bit…” he trailed off as Naruto puffed his chest, indignant, “unfair, to be honest. Putting you on a random team gives whomever we choose an unfair advantage above everyone else.”

Naruto’s indignant chest deflated as he took in the words, his brain working over the fact that it was actually a compliment. The inflation went predictably to his head. He sniggered, “I can see why! But- wait-” he became conflicted, still working over everything, “does this mean I can’t compete-?”

“Ah, well, that would be a problem,” Kakashi said uneasily. “Which is why the Elders and I have decided to make an exception, and for the first time ever allow a two-man cell to compete in the Chunin exams this year.”

Blinking twice, Naruto mumbled, “…Two-man cell…?”

And Sasuke came to the realization along with him. Naruto eyes were wide on him, and then his grin-

Panic educing his heartrate, Sasuke turned away from him to spit, “What the hell are you on about?!”

Shrugging his shoulders, Kakashi sighed shakily to the Elders behind him, “I told you he wouldn’t be thrilled.”

But the problem lay with Naruto, who had turned his balled fists, now coursing with excitement, at Sasuke. “Sasuke! Take the Chunin exams with me!”

Fuck. Sasuke shouted back at him, “Are you an idiot?!”

Rhetorical question. He was. Obviously. Incredibly idiotic. What a stupid- “Come on, Sasuke! We’re a team! We *have* to compete together! And if you don’t-”

“I can’t compete- I’m not a Konoha ninja!” he reminded desperately. Naruto hadn’t heard him over his own pleas, so Sasuke raised his voice louder. “*Shut up, Naruto*!” Naruto’s jaw clacked shut, but he was still pouting, using those large blue eyes to continue to beg. Sasuke

was forced to look away, choosing to glare at those two contemptible Elders instead. “I can’t compete in the Chunin exams. I’m a rogue ninja.”

He knew that sentence had made Naruto stop pouting; he could feel his change in emotion thick in the air. Fucking- *obviously* he couldn’t compete in the dumb exams. What the hell was Kakashi thinking-?

“That’s precisely why we would like you to participate in the exams, Sasuke-kun,” Koharu voiced. Clenching his jaw, Sasuke waited for an explanation, which she gave with a stern look. “We are not so convinced of your trustworthiness, yet. We have been lenient with you, of course, by the word of Kakashi. Rogue as you are, and having killed one of our long-time high council members who was set up at the time to become Hokage... Those things are not so easily forgotten, I’m sure you can see-”

The flare of hatred exploded in Sasuke’s chest, the ridiculous notion that *Sasuke* was the untrustworthy one, that *they* were the ones burdened with having to come to terms *his* existence. He wasn’t sure what he would have done in that moment were it not for Naruto, who had matched his fire by Sasuke’s side. “Who cares about that anymore?! Sasuke saved everyone’s ass last year, including yours! Of course he’s trustworthy!”

No, Sasuke knew, he wasn’t trustworthy with these two at all. He would have skewered them the instant he had seen them had it not been for Kakashi and Naruto’s presence. They had a right to not trust him, and nor should they ever delude themselves into doing so. Sasuke was a rogue ninja with a vendetta against them. They *better* stay afraid of him *and* his loyalties.

“Yes, we do not deny his contribution to the war,” Homura insisted, leaning forward in his seat. “Nor do we think he will attack the village on his own. But we are aware that he is not loyal to the state. Villages are supposed to deal with their rogue ninja, but for the first time in history we have a rogue ninja we are allowing to roam free.”

Beside him, Sasuke felt Naruto steel himself. He clenched his jaw, because it was not untrue. Koharu continued, “We can all agree that Sasuke-kun can be dangerous if he so chooses.” *We certainly all could*, Sasuke bitterly agreed with the squint of his two powerful eyes. She met them foolishly with no visible fear. “Your unpredictability is what concerns us. To have a rogue ninja strolling around our streets carelessly when we don’t understand his character would be unfitting of Konoha’s leadership. Kakashi sees something in you, which does offer some relief. But the pair of us- that is to say, Homura and myself, would prefer to see what loyalty you do have with our own eyes.”

Sasuke’s nostrils flared out as he breathed through his anger. Naruto was still taking it all in. “His loyalty?”

“To you,” Homura stated simply, and Sasuke had to shut his eyes, rest both his Sharingan and Rinnegan for a moment.

He wasn’t a fan of being so blatant about those things, but it wasn’t like it was a secret that he was loyal to Naruto. So Naruto shouldn’t have been reacting like Sasuke could feel he was, his smile growing slowly, and his blue eyes going soft, but proud. Even with his eyes closed, Sasuke knew this would be the reaction. His theory was confirmed with a sudden arm

slinging over his shoulders, and then the two of them were close again. “Okay, then! Let’s do it! Sasuke will show you that you have nothing to worry about!”

Damn it. With that, he was cornered. If he didn’t compete now, Naruto’s faith in him would waiver, and that must not happen. And if he didn’t go with him, Naruto would be disqualified- well, no. Sasuke didn’t think they wouldn’t be able to find another genin somewhere to compete with him. But Naruto would be under the impression that Sasuke didn’t care about Naruto’s goals, which- well, wasn’t true, because he knew there was no way Kakashi would disqualify him, but if Naruto thought so then that would be- bad? No- it shouldn’t matter- but it did, didn’t it?

And of course, there was the concerning suspicions of Orochimaru to think about…

It was too frustrating to muddle over anymore. He was tired and aggravated and Naruto had his arm around him, and if Sasuke did something to make him upset in that way… Sighing heavily, Sasuke grumbled, “Fine.”

“Yeah!” Naruto cheered loudly, pumping a fist into the air while his other arm held Sasuke closer.

There was that wriggling snake in his stomach again from the closeness; before the Elders saw any expression caused by it, Sasuke pushed himself out from under the hold. Purposefully ignoring Naruto’s reaction, Sasuke addressed his warning, “I think it’s actually for the best if I’m around for the exams. I have reason to believe Orochimaru is planning something.”

He did not miss the way the other three in the room stiffened at the mention of the name. Kakashi said evenly, “Orochimaru?”

“Huh?” Naruto tilted his head. “You think he’s going to show up at the exams again?”

Of course Naruto hadn’t been able to see Orochimaru’s meeting as anything other than a bizarre occurrence. “Yes,” Sasuke assured.

“What makes you think that?” Kakashi asked, his voice stony and level.

“He was waiting for us just inside Kawa. He knew that Naruto would be leaving Suna to head back here,” Sasuke explained.

“Yes,” Kakashi nodded. “Yamato sent us a letter.”

Bottom lip jutting out, Naruto had his hands behind his head. “He didn’t say anything about plans for the Chunin exams. He just wished us luck.”

Scoffing, Sasuke rolled his eyes, having not wanted to start this dumb argument again. “He wished *you* luck.”

“Wait!” Naruto suddenly chimed out. “How did he know you would be taking the exams?!”

“He didn’t-” but Sasuke cut himself off. It would be truly ridiculous to think Orochimaru somehow knew the Elders were going to come to him with this offer. It wasn’t like Orochimaru had any spies so high up in leadership anymore now that Danzo was dead-

“What did Orochimaru say, exactly?” Kakashi interrupted, still taking this jumbled mess seriously despite Naruto’s ridiculousness.

Naruto was quicker to answer than Sasuke was. “All he said about the Chunin exams was that he wished us luck. We talked longer about bonds.”

Resting his hand on his hip, Sasuke sighed out his exasperation. “I was by Orochimaru’s side for three years. I know how he works. He would not bring a topic up for no reason, no matter how insubstantial it seemed at the time. I’ve seen him tease his victims before striking too often, and he was definitely gearing up something towards Naruto. I have no doubt what he said was intentional foreshadowing.” The others were quiet, taking his words in. “I recommend you stay vigilant and increase security. I don’t think there’s much he can do with that ANBU holding his leash, but Orochimaru isn’t someone you should underestimate, regardless of how caged you think he is. Naruto can handle himself, and I guess if I’m with him you shouldn’t have to worry about something happening to him, but it’s obviously better to nip it in the bud before he breaks through your security.”

The officials in the room were unnervingly quiet. Before Sasuke could study their reactions too well, Kakashi nodded. “Thank you for letting us know, Sasuke. We will increase our security measures for the exam. I have the highest faith in Tenzo even without it, so with this you should not have to worry at all about Naruto’s safety.”

Flashing his eyes to Kakashi, Sasuke quickly amended, “I’m not worried.”

“Why do you think he’s after me?” Naruto asked, thankfully pulling the focus from the ridiculousness of their teacher. “He could be after you. It’s weird that he knew you were going to be taking the Chunin exams, too.”

“For the last time, you just misheard him. He was surprised to see me there. He didn’t know I was going to be travelling with you.” Scoffing, Sasuke accused, “It’s a good thing I *was*, because you probably would have given him your bank account information, the way you let him continue on.”

“Oi! I would not! What would he need my bank account for, anyway?”

Sasuke realized too late that this was too domestic of an argument for him to have in present company. “Shut up, Naruto,” he implored coolly, turning his face away.

Of course Naruto didn’t take this well. “You bastard!” he threatened, grabbing a hold of the front of Sasuke’s cloak.

This wouldn’t do, either. He pulled himself away from the hold, eager to leave before the Elders sparked more of the killer instinct in him. “I’m leaving,” he bid as he turned back toward the door.

“Oh- wait! Kakashi-sensei is buying us ramen!”

“Did I say I would pay?” Kakashi sighed, exasperatedly rubbing the back of his head.

“*Kakashi-sensei*!”

_o-O-o_

Kakashi did not pay for their dinner. Naruto complained about it all night, as if he somehow still had not learned by this point that their old teacher continued to stiff them the bill as more of an inside joke than anything. Kakashi had plenty of money to be treating them, being Hokage and all, but Naruto was easy to rile and Kakashi enjoyed teasing him in this way. Probably for the nostalgia. Definitely because he was trying to see how many more times Naruto would continue to be surprised by it.

Sakura had joined them, because of course Kakashi made sure to invite her. She sat to Sasuke’s right, and Sasuke was relieved to realize that he found her was much less annoying than usual. At least, he was able to drop his guard. It was nice to not feel like he had to be so hyperaware of his reactions to her. That wasn’t to say he still didn’t notice how she stared at him for too long, but it didn’t make him as uncomfortable as it once did.

The way Naruto filled the small ramen stall with his euphoria at being back at Ichiraku’s took more of Sasuke’s focus. It was ridiculous how simple-minded he could be about some things; how he could drop his every guard over some noodles. Well, thankfully the rest of his old team was here to make sure no one clobbered him from behind while he shoved three entire pork cutlets into his mouth at once.

It reminded him that he needed to be extra careful, for the idiot’s sake, about returning back to the apartment that had been left unsecure for weeks. Sasuke scanned the small home for signs of chakra or mistreatment, but there was thankfully nothing to be found.

Other than the small, black body curled up on Naruto’s bed near the pillows. Upon seeing the cat, Naruto stopped midsentence about Kakashi’s unfair stinginess to throw his hands up in the air and bellow jubilantly, “Teme-chan!” The cat glared at him for the noise, vibrant green eyes making it evident it was not happy to see Naruto in return. Unable to understand the cues, Naruto raced forward to reach his hand toward the cat’s soft ears. With a quick swipe, the cat scratched its claws along the offending hand. “Ahh! He scratched me!”

“No shit,” Sasuke bit. “Leave it alone.”

“He’s on my bed!” Naruto pouted.

“You shouldn’t have left your window open,” Sasuke nagged, still by the door removing his cloak.

Pouting, Naruto mumbled, “I wanted him to have someplace safe to sleep. He doesn’t have to be so ungrateful.”

“It’s a cat,” Sasuke reminded him, nearly pained by how ridiculous Naruto was at times.

Naruto's squinted eye turned back to him. "You're ungrateful too."

Face falling, Sasuke stared at him levelly for a moment. Dumbass. "I'm taking a bath," he called, choosing to drop what would have been a dumb conversation before it had even started. He stepped into Naruto's familiar bathroom and began running the water, getting it to his preferred scalding temperature in hopes to soothe the ache of travel.

Still cautious of the possibility that Naruto's apartment could have been tampered with at some point, Sasuke was careful with the placement of every lose item. He wished, idly, that he had taken to memory what the apartment had been like before leaving. His Sharingan could etch those things in. He had a few memories of the other rooms from it, but he never thought he would need to do that to the bathroom. Temari's words swam back to him, the semi-joking but still applicable jab about someone hiding a bomb under the toilet seat. It would be absolutely ludicrous to check for that, but the words were nagging at him enough…

Just as he set out to do it, he felt a presence enter the bathroom, the squeaking of the door inching open. Sasuke's eyes were on Naruto in a second, and he clenched his unimpressed lips together at the sight of him. "Get out," he commanded.

Flinching, Naruto rubbed the back of his head, unable to look Sasuke in the eye. "I was thinking that we could-" Sasuke threw the shampoo bottle at his face. Naruto yelped as it collided with his nose. When he recovered from the hit, Naruto began to grumble incoherently, eyes narrowed to slits. Sasuke could only catch a few phrases. "…can attack *me* whenever you want… ungrateful…" he backed out of the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

Honestly, whatever went through that idiot's mind, Sasuke didn't want to know. Did he think they would just… share baths all of the time now? Ridiculous. Sasuke was tired and sore, but not so tired and sore to repeat the previous week's luxury.

Sasuke bathed quickly, returning to Naruto's bedroom to find him kneeling on the floor next to the bed, staring huffily at the cat sleeping in the middle of his bed. Why he hadn't kicked the cat off yet was a mystery to Sasuke, but he didn't spare it much thought as he turned to try to find a clean pair of pajamas in Naruto's middle drawer.

Once he found a soft t-shirt (it was orange, which was unfortunate, but whatever) and another pair of bottoms, he turned back, planning on heading back to the bathroom to get dressed. Naruto was watching him though. Disturbed, Sasuke bit, "What?"

"Nothing," Naruto muttered, but his eyes had travelled the length of Sasuke's body in a way that made Sasuke feel like squirming.

Scoffing away his fluster, Sasuke badgered, "Go take a bath. You're gross."

Naruto didn't answer back, but did stand up and slowly make his way across the room. He kept his eyes on Sasuke the whole way, and Sasuke furrowed his brow as if warning him from saying something stupid in that moment. At the very end, just before Naruto rounded the corner, he gave Sasuke's nearly naked form another once over.

That one had managed to get some heat to Sasuke's cheeks. Naruto was acting weird, and Sasuke didn't like it. What had gotten Naruto in this mood, anyway? Wasn't he also tired?

Sasuke got himself dressed and in bed, determined to sleep. The cat was on Naruto's side, so Sasuke attested that he could let it be for the time being and hunker down onto his side of the mattress without needing to disturb it. With any luck, he'd be able to fall asleep by the time Naruto came out and tried something else moronic.

He had been on the edge of sleep, the mattress working wonders to lull him nearly unconscious, only to be ruined by a sharp jab to his shoulder, Naruto whispering his name urgently.

"*What*?" he demanded, peeved to have been disturbed when he was so close to sleep.

"Teme-chan's in my spot!" Naruto whined.

That was what Naruto woke him to say? Aggravated, Sasuke spat, "Just move it."

"He's sleeping!"

"So?"

"He's gunna scratch me again!" Sasuke growled, sitting up straight. As if Naruto wouldn't heal from a cat scratch within the hour. Deftly, Sasuke scooped the sleeping animal up under the stomach and plopped it to the ground next to him, knowing it would land on its feet. Easy. He laid back down, pulling the covers up to his ear, hoping Naruto would take the hint and shut up. He didn't, because he was Naruto. "How did you do that without him attacking you?!"

How Naruto could want to do anything but fall asleep right now was beyond Sasuke. "Just pick it up," he grumbled.

"It's mean!" Naruto insisted. "How would you like it if you were trying to sleep and I just picked you up and threw you on the floor?"

"I'd punch you," Sasuke promised.

"Exactly!"

"Go to sleep, Naruto." He could tell Naruto was pouting at him for being anti-social. Really, they had just spent days together on their journey back from Suna. What more conversation did he need? The bed beside Sasuke shifted slightly, Naruto's weight not doing too much to disturb the plush mattress, but his warmth filling it with his presence. As always, it was a comfortable mattress, but having Naruto in it next to him made a huge difference. His frustration ebbed.

Until Naruto spoke again. "We should talk about the Chunin exams!"

Eyebrow twitching, Sasuke rolled over to face him, intending to glare at him until he shut up. When he turned though, he realized that Naruto had chosen to be shirtless again. He forgot

what he rolled over to do. “Why are you shirtless,” he stated his question.

Pursing his lips, Naruto hardly had the sense to act ashamed, “It’s a warm night.” It was indeed warm. Sasuke could feel it in his cheeks. Naruto’s skin was scorching; the inches between them were radiating with heat. “You sure you don’t want to take yours off, too?” Naruto dared to ask.

The thickness down Sasuke’s throat was hard to work through. The writhing snake was back, doing its strange squirming down low in Sasuke’s stomach. Sasuke didn’t usually get too warm when he slept with Naruto, having always been one to get cold. Naruto’s heat always kept him pleasant. But that wasn’t really what Naruto was asking, and Sasuke was not so naïve to miss that. Naruto was being almost ridiculous tonight about it and Sasuke…

Sasuke pulled the blanket off of Naruto’s front to clear the space he needed to sit up over his thighs. The surprise on Naruto’s face from the action was evident, but there was a small smile accompanying the dropped jaw, and his palms came to rest just above Sasuke’s knees. Sasuke watched the hands, the feel of their weight on that part of him enthralling. It was hard to miss the bump in Naruto’s pajama bottoms jutting out under him.

And the memory, so perfectly preserved thanks to the Sharingan, flooded Sasuke’s senses. It had been weeks since he had Naruto in his hands, that thrilling feeling of bringing Naruto to that state. He remembered the marks of Kyuubi on his cheeks getting curiously deeper, something that usually only happened mid-battle. Not just any battles. The ones where he was so moved by his emotions, the primal energy inside of him stirred. Sasuke hadn’t even touched him yet, but he could already see them beginning to darken.

Propping himself up on his elbows, Naruto called his name, “Sasuke?”

Probably because he had situated himself in his lap and then froze there. Right. Sasuke moved his hand to Naruto’s stomach, palm flat, and heard him gasp. He was still sitting up slightly, so Sasuke trailed the hand upward and pushed hard on his chest until he laid flat again, slowly breathing and pulling his elbows out from under him.

His blue eyes were in awe, staring up at Sasuke with wary reverence- as if he hadn’t brought this upon himself. Honestly. He would prefer to not be gawked at for this. But he had come so far, and he wasn’t going to back down now. Sasuke slipped his fingers under the waistband of Naruto’s pants, thick blond hair giving texture to the otherwise smooth skin.

He wasn’t wearing any underwear, Sasuke was annoyed to discover. Naruto, ever the gutsy ninja, made an assumption about where the night was going. Perhaps Sasuke was being unfair; it wasn’t an assumption. It was a hope. A desire. He knew at the heart of it, Naruto would not have pressured him. Sasuke was tired and he wanted to sleep, but…

But he wanted even more to see Naruto undone again. Pointless, wasn’t it? Rest would have been better for both of them, to heal their bodies from the stress of travel. That was the logic of the situation. They had not gotten an abundance of sleep the past two weeks. The mattress did make a difference, though Sasuke had to admit that he slept pretty well on Naruto’s chest without it. But Naruto had his nightmares and Sasuke his insomnia when they were anywhere else. So they should have been sleeping, catching up on all that they had missed. But this was

what Naruto wanted to do, Sasuke could feel it, and Sasuke did want it too. A little. It would be nice to add another memory, a pair to sit next to the other one from Naruto's kitchen.

So Sasuke found the epicenter of Naruto's arousal, holding its heat in his fist and pulling it out into the night. He remembered the movements to it vividly, the quick rhythm that had brought Naruto over the edge last time, and he matched it. Sure enough, Naruto began to writhe. His body jerked with pleasure, and Sasuke relished in the sight. There was a power he held in this position, having so much control over Naruto's body. It was a bit overwhelming to come to terms with. At the heart of it, Sasuke had never been able to control any of Naruto's actions before, not at all. But with his hand, now… He didn't know what to do with this power other than to keep going, see to the ends of it-

With a strangled grunt, Naruto placed a hand on top of Sasuke's, and Sasuke paused his movements. Had he done something wrong? Certainly not. Through labored breaths, Naruto huffed out, his voice gruff, "Slower." Slower? Sasuke furrowed his brows. That didn't make sense; wasn't speed what brought out the climax? It had for Sasuke. But Naruto had begun to guide Sasuke's hand into a rhythm that couldn't possibly have been satisfying. "'M not in a rush," Naruto explained, an answer that did not seem like an answer at all. Not in a rush to finish? But wasn't that the point?

Curious, Sasuke set to keep the torturous rhythm after Naruto's guiding hand fell. He would just have to wait and see, then, how this was somehow better. Both of Naruto's palms ran up Sasuke's thighs again, fingernails digging in up at the top. The thumbs were close enough to the insides of his legs that Sasuke shuttered, because it brought attention to the weight between them. When had he gotten so hard? He did his best to ignore it.

Slow movements it was, then. He watched his own hand pump Naruto's cock, fascinated by the sight of the slit. A pearl-like bead of fluid had formed there. Sasuke remembered a conversation from last time. Surely, the nightstand had what he needed. He didn't want to stop his hand, but had no choice. He leaned forward and pulled the drawer open. It was a far reach.

Thankfully, Naruto caught on. At the loss of contact, he blinked his eyes open. He seemed to know exactly where to reach in the open drawer, pulling out a bottle with a pump cap without looking. Sasuke sat back again onto Naruto's lap, watching as he held the bottle out in front of him. Wordlessly, Sasuke held his hand under it, and Naruto dispensed a few squirts of lotion to him.

When Sasuke grabbed him again, Naruto jerked. "'Cold," Naruto explained before relaxing back again. "Keep going." So Sasuke did, back again with the slow rhythm.

He could see why the lotion would be preferable. His hand was gliding over the skin easier now, less friction to prevent the movement. Less overstimulation.

Naruto was enthralling to watch like this. The beads of sweat down his temples, his chest rising and falling, his stomach muscles clenching. At some point he began to thrust minutely into Sasuke's hand as though it was an unconscious movement. It lasted a long time, and Sasuke was not upset by it at all. The memory of last time was one thing; having the real

thing in front of him was something else entirely. He brought his Sharingan out again, preserving it further.

At some point the lotion all absorbed, and Sasuke had to let go again and reach for the bottle, which Naruto had placed slightly out of his reach on the other side of the mattress. Naruto grabbed it for him, letting out a chuckle that sounded almost broken. “Lotion dried up. ‘Does that.” Sasuke dispensed it himself this time and set back to work. Naruto continued to talk, sounding like he had taken one of Orochimaru’s experimental painkilling drugs. “They invent stuff that doesn’t dry up so quick. It’s in those shops. ‘M not old enough to buy it yet. Stole some from Ero-Sennin’s bag once. ‘S’all gone now. You’re old enough. ‘Should buy us some. ‘Be weird to see you in one of those shops. Ha! You’d be so awkward.”

Sasuke felt a bizarre laughter rising up in him. “Shut up, dumbass. You’re not making sense.”

“It’s good stuff. You should try it sometime. Once you buy us some, if you stop being so prissy,” Naruto continued to ramble, and Sasuke was too amused at this version of Naruto he was witnessing to let himself feel awkward about having a conversation during the present situation. “’Can go really fast. Or slow for a long time. Long time. Feels really good. Sasuke.” Naruto saying his name like that, so breathless, guttural, Sasuke felt himself spiraling, falling somewhere deep. “Sasuke, you- you’re good at this. ‘Course you are.”

“It’s not a very hard thing to learn,” Sasuke told him, because the compliment was too strange to address differently.

“You’re good at everything. Pisses me off.”

“Shut up.”

“I’ve had more practice at this, but you’re still better at it. ’Makes no sense because you’ve never done it before, but you’re still good at it,” Naruto kept going, as if he was unable to stop talking. “The shadow clones aren’t as good at this. It doesn’t make sense.”

At this, Sasuke found himself pausing his movements for a moment. He continued, not wanting to stop for too long, lest he lose his progress. “Shadow clones?”

And Naruto was giggling, now. “It feels better when it’s not your own hand.” Peculiar. It was a weird thing to do, Sasuke was sure. Ridiculous. But he thought about Naruto conjuring up a clone or two and doing this to himself, and he found himself swallowing thickly again. Still, it was outlandish, he firmly told himself. And then Naruto added, still giggling incessantly, “Or mouth,” and Sasuke stopped his movement again. It wasn’t until Naruto called his name, his body squirming, that Sasuke snapped back into the right headspace to continue.

That was a thought to lock away tightly.

Naruto seemed to be breathing more than ever, and he was stiffer than Sasuke thought possible. The flesh in Sasuke’s hand was a deep, angry color. Sasuke had been working at him for an obscenely long time. He couldn’t believe how long this could last. Still, he wasn’t in a hurry for it to end, either. “Sasuke,” Naruto called again, and Sasuke waited for him to continue, wondering what that brain could possibly have come up with this time. “Sasuke,

you-” He cut himself off, eyes fluttering open to meet Sasuke’s. “You have your Sharingan out.”

Sasuke opened his mouth to respond, but had to close it. Finally, he settled on a diversion, “Your eyes are slitted. You’re exuding the Kyuubi’s chakra.”

“I- huh?” He held his hand up, catching sight of his elongated fingernails. “Oh. Huh. That makes sense.” What made sense, Naruto did not explain. Perhaps he could feel the effects of the natural energy. “Your Sharingan’s cool. Why do you have it out?” Sasuke faltered for a moment at the question. The truth, he realized, was too embarrassing to say out loud. It was just a memory he was preserving. That he wanted to memorize the sight of Naruto writhing underneath him, his flush red cock leaking in his hand, would be torturous to admit. Thankfully, Naruto was babbling too much and it seemed like he didn’t even want the answer, because he moved on without it. “Pisses me off. It’s hot. You’re hot. You’re such a jerk.”

“Shut up,” Sasuke said once more, too flustered for anything else.

“Jerk,” Naruto called him again.

“Dumbass.”

At the word, Naruto came, the moment seeming endless. Streaks of white painted his stomach again and again to the point of absurdity. Sasuke continued his motion through it until Naruto was twitching, his body attempting to curl in on itself despite Sasuke’s weight holding it down. Sasuke’s hand began to slow after several long moments, more droplets dripping out at each squeeze of the tip. Naruto’s breaths became longer, though it was still laborious.

Eventually, Sasuke let go of his grip, his hand a mess. He held it limp as he sat back to study Naruto in the dark, his eyes still soaking up every instant. “Are you satisfied now?” he asked with a raised eyebrow, prepared to tease Naruto for the shameless way he had been acting just before they began this.

“No,” Naruto said, and then he was sitting up, and Sasuke’s lips were taken in the next instant.

He had not been prepared for Naruto to have had the energy to return the favor right then and there, but he was incessant on teaching Sasuke the thrill of a slower rhythm, and what kind of rewards patience had in these situations. At least Sasuke, for his part, did not start spewing embarrassing nonsense three quarters of the way through.

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15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Chunin exams started the following Wednesday. The first part of the exam was being held in the school, just as they had been all those years ago. Sasuke did his best to quell the nostalgia that was swooping low in his stomach, almost like it was making him nervous. Which was stupid. The last time he had taken the exams he had only been testing his own strength. Though he would be lying if he said he hadn't wanted the dumb title of Chunin at the time to secure faith in his superior abilities. This time, however, he could not care less about those ridiculous titles, as he already knew his strength could only be matched by one other person. So it was unfounded for him to be more nervous now than he had been back then.

He was purposefully late. Naruto was leaning against the building just to the side of the entrance, arms crossed and lip pouting, obviously frustrated at having to wait. Sasuke wasn't concerned with this; Naruto was sure to be plenty hyper and he'd rather avoid that at such an early hour in the morning. Plus he hadn't wanted to be around when the bulk of the crowd was arriving. These were the first exams since the war, having been on pause for recuperation, and it was sure to be an even larger mass of genin than last time. He wasn't certain if anyone else besides the officials knew ex-terrorist Sasuke Uchiha was taking these exams or not.

After the last of the group milling around outside went in, Sasuke landed on the lawn in front of his exam-mate. Naruto did not seem surprised at his late arrival, knowingly clicking his tongue, "You had to wait until everyone was gone, huh?"

"Shut up," Sasuke told him. "Let's get this over with."

Sasuke rolled his eyes when they entered the exam room; he realized too late that it would have been better for them to be super early, because coming in as the last to enter the exam room had made them quite the spectacle. What had been a noisy hall went annoyingly hush. Sasuke side-eyed Naruto; he had that cocky grin on, the same one from all of those years ago when he shouted his dumb taunts to a similar room. Back then the other opponents gathered around had been, Sasuke begrudgingly had to admit, intimidating.

Now they looked like the children they were.

Naruto and Sasuke were the intimidating ones, that was for sure. Their history was well known. Sasuke assessed the room, which was about twice as large as the last time he had taken these exams, while simultaneously being twice as jam-packed. Headbands gave him some insight as to why- it seemed this was a global exam. Headbands for villages from Earth and Lightning were here as well, something Sasuke had not anticipated. And they were all staring at the pair of them with, at least on some level, fear. There were plenty who were

foolish enough to be trying to mask that fear, stink eyes popping up intermittently throughout the room. Sasuke was sure that if his younger self had been amongst this group, he'd be acting the same way. Of Naruto there was no doubt.

Trying not to sigh too deeply, Sasuke pinched Naruto by the ear and dragged him away from the door before he said something stupid to rile the crowd. The pair of them would be targeted by every wanna-be hot-shot come the second exam even without it, and he didn't want that number to grow because Naruto forgot that he didn't *need* to boast anymore. The last thing Sasuke wanted to do was incite more of these kids into needlessly attacking them.

He pulled Naruto, who stumbled and cursed ungracefully behind him, into the corner of the room. As soon as Sasuke dropped him, Naruto pawed at his offended ear. Sasuke ignored his indignant pout. "Don't rile them up. We're already going to be targets."

Pouting, Naruto rolled his eyes, "So?"

"*So*, it'll be annoying."

"Naruto-niichan!" a voice called out, and the pair of them turned to see the Third Hokage's grandson putting on a cocky smile, posing with his hands behind his head and looking like a spitting image of Naruto.

"Konohamaru!" Naruto was grinning and mirroring the same position back. "You're taking these exams too?"

At this, Konohamaru's face fell into one of annoyance. "You already knew that. We've been talking about it for weeks."

"Must have forgotten," Judging by the way Naruto smirked, he had not forgotten.

Sasuke had not really known this kid at all, but he seemed to have certainly spent his youth imitating Naruto, because he pushed his fist out in front of him, swearing "I'm looking forward to kicking your ass," and Sasuke had never seen a better impersonation.

At this, Naruto chuckled, "You better pass this first exam then."

"You bet I will!" Konohamaru challenged. Sasuke sighed, leaning back against the wall and hoping to be ignored. It seemed there would be no way to avoid Naruto getting like this. Whatever. At least there was someone here who wasn't afraid of Naruto's power. "I'll kick your ass, too!"

At this, Sasuke looked up to find determined eyes channeling straight into him. How cute. Still, it was something Naruto would have done, so he found himself fighting a smile. "Can't wait," he taunted back.

"Harem Jutsu won't work on him," Naruto was whispering behind his hand into Konohamaru's ear.

Naruto was rubbing the bump Sasuke inflicted on his head when they were called to take their preassigned seats. Konohamaru left them with that inflated smile, Naruto whining past

his pain and hardly noticing. He had just turned to find his seat when Sasuke grabbed him by the shoulder. “Naruto,” he reminded, and then managed to catch those blue eyes with his own. They nodded to each other, eyes locked, then found their seats.

The genjutsu was already initiated.

The proctor made his entrance, and a hush fell over the room. Around him, a collection of jonin and chunin began to line the room, each with a clipboard and red marking pen in their hands. They circled the room, the ones responsible for marking down cheaters. The sheer number of them reflected the inflated number of test takers. It seemed Sasuke was right to predict that the first stage would be relatively the same in concept from the last time they took this exam. Good. That was what they had planned for.

“So these are the numbers we’re working with this year, I see,” the proctor surveyed the room. “No matter. By the time I’m done with you all we will be down two thirds of this size.” With a quick sweep of his eye, Sasuke estimated around three hundred participants, roughly twice the amount as last time. The number did nothing for him. All he cared about was getting Naruto through the first two stages, which would surely be child’s play. The proctor continued, “My name is Ibiki Morino, and now that I trust you are all in your correct seats, my team will dispense you your first exam.”

The tests were handed out relatively quickly for the size of the room, placed face down onto everyone’s desks. Sasuke awaited further instruction, trying to decipher what the differences in the rules would be this year, because surely there had to be some.

“I will now explain the rules, so you will want to listen carefully,” Ibiki instructed from the front of the room. “In front of you, you have ten questions. Every question that you answer will give you one point. At the end of the test, I will issue an oral eleventh question, worth five points. Anyone who fails to reach a score of thirty points by the end of the exam will be eliminated.”

A hush fell over the already quiet room, everyone doing the math in their heads. Sure enough, one of the genin, an impatient looking kunoichi, raised her hand, “How is it possible for us to make thirty points if the maximum number we could possibly get is fifteen?”

It must have been her first year taking this, Sasuke gathered. Ibiki eyed her carefully, “Did you think you’re taking this test by yourself?” He placed his hands on the desk in front of him, leaning forward to make a stern impression. “Your success as a shinobi is the success of your team. One of the most important concepts to learn is the strength in numbers and in unity. You are united with your team on every mission that you are sent on. Failure to stay united leads to failure of your mission. Your mission today is to pass this test as one unit by racking up a collective passing score of thirty points.”

This meant that a normal three-man group would each need to garner an average of ten points total to pass. For Sasuke and Naruto, it meant they each needed all fifteen of their total individual points. Despite himself, Sasuke couldn’t help staring at the back of that blond head. Sasuke had no interest in becoming a chunin. Getting Naruto to pass was the only reason he had come.

“The importance of being in sync with your team will be analyzed in your answers,” Ibiki continued, and Sasuke ripped his eyes away from Naruto to study him. “You work together as one. Every answer you give will have to be in the same words. As such, any answer that differs from one or both of your teammates will be marked incorrect. You will be awarded no points.”

That was certainly interesting. Sasuke watched as the meaning dawned on the others’ expressions. If any of their teams had a weak link, someone who couldn’t answer the questions, the entire team would be finished. What was more, they had to word their answers in the same way as their other two teammates would. Even Sasuke and Naruto would have trouble keeping their answers exactly the same based solely on their bond.

If it weren’t for their plan, that was.

“All cheating will be prohibited,” Ibiki said firmly, and Sasuke scoffed out a quiet laugh. “We have our examiners situated around the room, and anyone caught cheating will be docked two points. If you fail the first ten questions by cheating, you will be kicked from the room before the eleventh question, and your entire team will be eliminated with you.” All in all, it was much less intimidating than the first time Sasuke heard it. Anyone who couldn’t figure out that they were meant to cheat without getting caught would certainly have a horrible time trying to play mind games to figure out what their two teammates would be answering the questions with. Not to mention that the questions this time around were sure to be just as difficult to answer. Sasuke was glad that he and Naruto set up the plan that they did. “And may I reiterate that you *do*, in fact, need to answer the questions in front of you. Any blank question will be marked incorrect.”

He was staring undeniably directly at Naruto, who was rubbing the back of his head and laughing uneasily, and Sasuke’s expression fell remembering the conversation the pair of them had the previous weekend. Apparently no one had told him, in all of these years, that the real purpose of the exam was supposed to be about cheating and not getting caught. Something inside Sasuke withered away feebly at how Naruto dodged the poison-tipped shuriken that was their last Chunin exams by tripping over his own two feet and falling flat on his face. It seemed Ibiki was amused at having been bested by someone so dimwitted he didn’t even know the loophole he had been exploiting, though rightfully just as exasperated as Sasuke felt about it.

With a pained sigh, Ibiki called out, “You have one hour to complete the first ten questions. Your test beings now.”

The sound of hundreds of papers flipping over at the same time brought Sasuke back into focus. With the blink of his eye he was sitting next to Naruto, traversing into the genjutsu he had placed. It was so easy, really. With such a simple illusion he and Naruto were able to talk to each other and see each other’s tests without anyone else having a clue.

Naruto smirked slightly at him, and Sasuke reminded him, “You can talk to me how you like, but don’t move around. The rest of your body movements are visible to everyone else so that you have free movement to write.”

Flippantly Naruto rolled his eyes, “Yes, I remember.”

Well, Sasuke could never be too sure. “Okay, what’s the first question?”

Bottom lip jutting out, Naruto read the question aloud. “‘Which two major clans were responsible for the creation of Konohagakure?’” Sasuke blinked twice at the question, having to steal a glance at his own paper to ensure Naruto hadn’t misread it. He hadn’t. “Well, that’s the Uchiha and the Senju.” Naruto said dutifully before scrawling the answer down in his messy handwriting. Sasuke brought his jaw back up with a clack of his teeth, furrowing his brows before copying the answer on his own paper, being certain the wording matched exactly.

Shaking his head of the absurdity, Sasuke moved on. “The next question is ‘What relationship did the Second Raikage have with the First Raikage’…” Sasuke trailed off. A history question about Kumogakure? First Konoha, then Kumo… Sasuke scanned the rest of the page, and his suspicion proved true. This was a history test, one in which all nations were included. Those in each specific village would have no problem answering their own history, but the questions about the other villages certainly were meant to stump. So not only were they meant to cheat to give their teammates exact answers, they needed to gather information from the other genin from other villages. What a bother. Well, Sasuke still had his Sharingan that could copy movement-

“He was his bodyguard,” Naruto answered, and Sasuke frowned.

“How do you know that?”

“Bee talked about it once,” he said simply, and then he was writing his answer down. “Hmm. And the next one, ‘How is the Tsuchikage chosen’, the previous Tsuchikage chooses them. The old man mentioned it at one of the after-war meeting things Kakashi made me go to. He has a secret list that he can change whenever he wants so that if he dies randomly, it’s still his choice. Man, these questions are easy! Wish the first time we took it had been like this.”

They certainly were not easy. The next question was about Suna, and then about the Mizukage, and even one about Iron, even though there weren’t any shinobi in that country. And Naruto was able to answer them all with almost no thought needed. Sasuke was stumped. Surely the test had not been geared toward Naruto, had it? He didn’t think Kakashi would do such a thing, let alone that the other Kages would allow the Hokage full range of the test questions in that way. And how would anyone have known that Naruto knew this obscure information? Was Naruto just *this* well-versed in the other villages’ history?

Truthfully, Sasuke had assumed he would have had to carry Naruto through this portion of the test, but as it was, Naruto was providing to be his most valuable asset. The other villages were always incredibly hush about any information leaking, even something as mundane as how many official buildings there were in Suna.

Perhaps there was part of what he was learning with Iruka during the week about the other countries. But it couldn’t go so far into detail, not unless the villages suddenly decided to ship over their history books after a century of keeping them locked up. And Naruto punctuated that majority of his answers with anecdotal ‘*Gaara showed me*-’s and ‘*When Ero-Sennin and I visited, we heard*-’s. The simplest reason Sasuke could conclude was that Naruto knew all

of this from being well-travelled. But even though Sasuke travelled for a living, he didn't know those answers. Naruto, Sasuke knew, wasn't stupid. He could be forgetful, but…

Not usually about other people. Sasuke couldn't remember ever telling Naruto that his favorite food was tomatoes. Sasuke had never explicitly told anyone that before, sans his immediate family. Somehow, though, Naruto had figured it out in their youth and was able to carry that information past years being apart. Naruto genuinely cared about other people. He listened to them. Perhaps those seemingly meaningless facts about other countries were just an extension of that to him…

It was a lot to ponder over while Sasuke copied Naruto's writing word-for-word. Naruto had always been more perceptive than people gave him credit for.

Sasuke would be lying if he said he didn't feel a tug of jealousy at how easy this exam was for Naruto. It had no place to be there; what did Sasuke care about the Tsuchikage's succession process? Or which Mizukage established their current training system? But he didn't like feeling useless, doing nothing but copying Naruto's work. To sooth himself, he remembered that had Naruto been unable to answer a question, it would have been up to him to steal it off of someone else. It was barely enough consolation.

"Wow, that test was a piece of cake!" Naruto noted, setting his pencil down and leaning back on his chair. He seemed oblivious to the fact that he was by far the first to finish. "What do you think the last question's going to be? Think it'll just be another phony ultimatum one?"

Finishing up the last of his copying, Sasuke pondered this. "Who knows? But I doubt that proctor would play the same trick twice. I'm going to let up on the genjutsu a bit just in case any of the examiners catch on, so shut up and sit still until the last question."

Naruto had breezed them through the test so quickly that waiting for the rest of the hour to pass was numbingly boring. Sasuke couldn't afford to pass the time by watching the other test-takers lest one of the examiners got suspicious that he was cheating. If they lost even a single point, Naruto would be barred from moving to the second exam. He could, perhaps, spend the rest of it talking to Naruto in the genjutsu, but it was better to give Naruto his free movement back to avoid suspicion.

Intermittently, teams were called out at having been caught cheating too many times, disqualifying them from the rest of the exam. They called them in groups, clearing the room out by ten or more at a time. At least it gave Sasuke something to look at for a bit.

Eventually a loud bell rang out, signaling the end of the first ten questions. "Your time is up," Ibiki bellowed to the room. "Flip over your papers to the back side of the exam. This is where you will write your last answer."

The room bustled with movement for a moment as everyone followed the instructions. Sasuke could hear a few people cursing under their breath, having probably been unable to answer a few of the questions. Unconcerned with them, Sasuke listened carefully for the last question's rules.

The proctor eyed them all carefully. “This question, as I mentioned before, will be worth five points. It is a mandatory question. Failure to answer it will result in the immediate disqualification of you and your other teammates. Getting this question wrong, or else answering it in words that do not match your teammates’, will also result in disqualification. You will have five minutes to write down your answer. I advise you use all of your minutes wisely.”

The room was dead silent, hung up on the severity. Sasuke’s eyes travelled once again to Naruto’s back. He had no doubt he’d know the answer, judging by the rest of the quiz. But would Sasuke?

“Which country is the most important alliance to your hometown?”

Sasuke stared down at his blank paper. Alliances. The pencil in his hand felt heavy. He was supposed to answer this question as a Konoha shinobi. After the war, the importance of alliances was certainly on every country’s mind. How barbaric, though, to expect one alliance to be more important than the other. Which one would Konoha choose? Sasuke didn’t want to think like a Konoha shinobi. Naruto would know the answer, but Sasuke had wanted to answer the last question, at least *one* question, on his own.

How stupid countries were, Sasuke thought. Weighing one over the other. Choosing whom to associate with based on what benefactors they offered. Perhaps they meant for it to be their longest-standing alliance, in which case the answer would probably be Suna. But the thought of writing down a singular country was revolting.

He knew his answer.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Sasuke finally joined up with Naruto in the genjutsu. “Naruto,” he called in greeting, to let him know he was safe to speak again.

Naruto laughed, once. His hand was over his paper, covering what he had written. He turned to grin at Sasuke. “What’s your answer?” he asked, and Sasuke took a moment to examine his content, challenging expression. It appeared that Naruto had not been oblivious to the fact that he had carried Sasuke through this exam. But he also knew that both he and Sasuke would have the same opinion on this last question. Which country was the most important alliance to them?

“All of them.”

Naruto removed his hand, the words appearing from under it. ‘*All of them*’.

It must have been such a natural answer for him. Probably had popped into his head immediately after the question was asked.

Sasuke dropped the genjutsu, unaware that he was smiling until he was back in reality. What an admirable future Hokage that boy was. He wondered, for a moment, how many other genin would be knocked out with this question. Surely that was the correct answer; it was in Sasuke’s book, and Naruto’s opinion sealed it. Thinking back on the test, how it was curated to reflect every village, Sasuke was sure that that was the trick.

Minutes later, small fires burst from sporadic desks. He scoffed at the one on his immediate left; the boy next to them nearly fell backwards in his seat. It seemed his test paper had caught fire, as did a good portion of the room's. People who answered incorrectly. So that's what the chakra on the paper was for.

The room rang out with protests. "Wait- but- Suna's had an alliance with Konoha for years!" one Suna ninja interjected the loudest.

"If you have chosen to write down a singular country, then you have answered the question incorrectly." Ibiki scolded. "Over the century, all countries have seen a lot of war. What we have seldom seen is peace. We are currently dawning a new era. Any peace we have all seen in the past was nothing more than illusion compared to what our Kages have been working toward in this last year. What we need now is global unity."

"But who says unity is justice?" a Kiri ninja interjected. "My village has had large numbers murdered by the hands of Iwa and Suna-"

"And does Kiri not have just as much blood on its own hands?" Ibiki challenged, and the Kiri ninja shut her mouth tight. "It was hardly a year ago that all of humanity would have been eradicated had we not formed together as one army. Our alliances are what saved us."

The kunoichi wasn't finished. "That was different! We had a common enemy, and we had no other choice. My mother was murdered by Iwagakure. Why should I trust they wouldn't betray us-?"

No sooner had she said it did five Iwa ninja stand. "Kiri was plotting to overthrow our Tsuchikage!" one of them yelled.

"We were framed by Konoha-"

"*Everyone shut up*!" There he was. Sasuke was not surprised in the least to have seen Naruto stand up, cutting the pandemonium down before it snowballed further. All of the tension in the air- Sasuke was certain Naruto could feel every iota of it, every individual's emotions seeping straight through him. "What difference does it make?!" He addressed the now silent crowd, his natural ability to reach out to other people's hearts commanding the respect of everyone in the room. "Look around at us all," he gestured wildly around the room, to the plethora of symbols on headbands. "Suna, Iwa, Kiri, Konoha, Kumo- what *differences* do you see?"

The room was quiet for a tense moment.

Naruto continued. "We may be from difference countries, but above that all we are all human beings. We care for our families and friends, and for so long we've all fought each other to protect the people we love. But we failed to realize that we're all the same! We've all hurt each other over and over again trying to bring justice to our loved ones, in turn hurting someone else's loved one and creating another person who needs justice. It has to stop somewhere." He had his fists clenched, knuckles leaning against his desk. "I get that it's hard, and I get that it might be impossible for some of you. But the answer to the question is

that *every* alliance is important. The more we see each other as allies, the less people get hurt. If you said anything else- then I'm sorry! But you answered the question wrong!"

He punctuated his last sentence with several long, laborious breaths. No one dared speak after the Great Shinobi Hero; they couldn't contradict him. How far Naruto had come, Sasuke thought once he returned back to his own body, having felt as if he had experienced that monologue from somewhere far away. But really, *had* he come far? Was this not whom Naruto had always been? He had certainly travelled lengths to get to a place where a crowd would listen to him, but at the core of it, Naruto had always held such beliefs.

It was hard to not think of Itachi, what he had learned about his brother's beliefs far too late after his death. Itachi had been so caught in between the clan and the village, without truly ever understanding the point of either of them. But his beliefs had been manipulated against him.

"Everyone who doesn't have a test paper anymore, please leave the room," Ibiki managed to bring the authority back onto himself with this. Silently, half of the room dismissed themselves. The tension was still thick when Ibiki brought his hands together for another fire sign. A handful more papers lit up. "Those of you whose answers differ from your teammates may be dismissed as well." They too left without a word.

The numbers had indeed dwindled down to a few tens over a hundred. Ibiki hadn't quite managed to knock the room down by two-thirds like he had initially predicted.

Once the last of them had gone, Ibiki commended everyone left. "Congratulations to the rest of you. You have passed the first part of your Chunin exams. Part two will commence-"

A body smashed through the window. "Come on, Ibiki, leave something for me!" its voice berated him, and Sasuke recoiled a bit as he placed her. Anko, her name was, and he had last seen her body unconscious on the floor of that cave, having used her curse mark to extract Orochimaru from to revive him. "I'm Anko, the proctor for your second exam! Make sure you're ready, because part two will happen in a few hours! We will meet at noon at the Forest of Death, so if you need directions, be sure to grab them from an examiner now!"

Ibiki pinched the bridge of his nose. "You don't have to break the window every time, Anko."

"I've gotta make an entrance!"

This signaled the end of this portion for Sasuke as well as many others. He stood up, leaving his exam paper on the desk. He wanted to leave, but Naruto was still slumped over in his seat. He pushed past the bustle of people exiting. "Oi," he called once he was next to him, watching Naruto jostle at his voice.

His blue eyes looked a little dazed. "Oh," he said softly, still sounding far away. It seemed he had bummed himself out with his own speech, somehow. Probably from the fact that he had to give it at all.

Countries. Villages. Sasuke could see how feeble the entire concept was. But he didn't like Naruto in such a state. He decided it was bad enough that he had to use his ultimate

countermeasure against Naruto's woes. "Come on. We've got some time to get some ramen."

It worked instantly. "Really!?" Naruto had bolted upright, as if the funk he had been in hadn't occurred at all. Sasuke knocked the back of his knuckles against the head of blond hair. Naruto took the playful hit in stride, grinning back up at him. "Great! Let's go- wait!" He cut himself off, having stood almost inhumanly quickly, but then freezing. He grabbed his paper then raced around the desk to the front of the room, holding it out right under Ibiki's nose. "I answered them all correctly this time!"

"Did yo-" At first he sounded uninterested, but then Ibiki cut himself off. "*Correctly*?" He grabbed the paper, eyes flitting over the page as Naruto sniggered. After a moment of this, he pulled back in disbelief. "…How…?"

"See? I'm not an idiot! Full marks!" Naruto boasted loudly.

Ibiki looked almost pained as he set the paper down, so slowly, his eyebrow twitching and speaking through his teeth. "That's great, Naruto. But you didn't have to answer the questions correctly."

Grin still cockily wide on his face, the words didn't quite seem to faze Naruto yet. "Huh?"

Sasuke, however, was suddenly making sense of the rules of this exam. The pain in Ibiki's voice grew more potent, "I never said that you had to answer any question besides the eleventh correctly. Just that they had to be the same words as your teammate's."

Slowly, it dawned on him, and then Naruto was screeching, "*HUH*?!"

Of course, Sasuke berated himself, barely holding himself together as well. He hadn't put any thought into it in the slightest, that the questions were unbelievably difficult, because Naruto had answered them so easily. He hadn't *needed* to think about it.

"Wait!" Anko was next to them, looking gleeful as she grabbed Naruto's paper. "Did he answer all of the questions correctly?! Didn't you say that this quiz was the hardest one you had ever created, Ibiki? Didn't you give each village a different quiz so that they couldn't cheat the answers from other villages?! Weren't you going on and on about how no one was going to be able to get all of the answers correct?! That you purposefully wanted everyone to realize how little they knew about other countries?! He answered them *all*!?" She was laughing at him, taunting him for falling short on what must have been a pretty pretentious brag.

So even if Sasuke had attempted to cheat, he wouldn't have been able to find the answers. Without Naruto he would have failed this test. No, he would have figured out the riddle, surely, that Ibiki had never stated in the rules that the first ten answers needed to be correct. But he couldn't know that for sure, now, because he had depended solely on Naruto for the entirety of the test.

Naruto, for his part, did not seem overjoyed like he should have been. He held his head in his hands. "You- You mean it didn't *matter*?! I've never gotten full marks on a test before, and

you’re telling me this is the first time it didn’t *matter* if I answered them all correctly or not?!”

Ibiki looked to be in so much pain that between this Chunin exam and their last, Sasuke was certain the proctor would have a vendetta against Naruto for the rest of his life.

All in all, it was the most unsatisfactory way for someone to pass a test for all three of them.

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Chapter End Notes

y'all. i cannot explain to you in enough detail. how utterly PISSED i am.

you know i wrote 80% of this fic without having watched any episode that sasuke was not in??? you know the only fillers i ever watched were like the kakashi mask ones and the one with the second kiss??????? then tell me. TELL ME. how i decide to skim through the fillers that have sasuke's va listed and see sasuke's va credited for like one line in a filler and, bc i was thirsty for sasuke content, decided to skip through the episode to watch the singular line of dialog, thinking it would just be a flashback. and now TELL ME HOW THE FILLERS. THE FILLERS!!!! HAD THE SAME IDEA I HAD ABOUT HAVING THE SAME ANSWERS AS YOUR TEAMMATES IN THE FIRST TEST OF THE CHUNIN EXAMS!!!!!!! i was and am SO MAD ABOUT IT LOOLLLLLLL

I THOUGHT I WAS BEING CLEVER!!!! I THOUGHT IT WAS UNIQUE!!!!!!! i am SO upsetti spaghetti about this you don't even KNOW. i refused to change the concept though bc it was perfect for the story i'm telling and also in my mind i came up with it first (and implemented it better¯_(ツ)_/¯) so THEY are the ones who should change it you know??? im coming for them with copyright claims (i should legally state here that this is a joke, i'm using hyperbole as a comedic effect and do not in any way have plans to bring a goddamn sasunaru fic to court also fuck you anne rice and AO3 you're wonderful i love you)

i refused to watch the rest of the episode and also did not watch any of the other episodes of that filler arc bc if i find out that what i have planned for the upcoming chapters here in ANY way resemble what the naruto filler writers came up with, i WILL combust lmao

16

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“Each three-man cell will be responsible for collecting five scrolls total, one of each element- Fire, Wind, Lightning, Earth, and Water. The locations of these scrolls are scattered throughout the forest, each stash of scrolls guarded by a jonin. It’s your team’s job to find the scrolls and win them from the jonin by any means necessary. Keep in mind, there are no other rules in the arena. If you are having trouble collecting the scrolls from a jonin, you can get creative about other ways to get your hands on what you need. Once you have the five scrolls, you will bring them to the tower in the center of the arena, where the conclusion of the test will take place. You will have a time limit of 5 days- that is to say, 120 hours.”

The large group listened raptly to Anko’s instructions. It wasn’t too different from what Sasuke had expected; gather the required scrolls and bring them to the tower. Same concept as last time, really, just that they were responsible for taking them from jonin. Certainly they were still allowed to steal them from each other, as well. It would not be too difficult for him and Naruto to steal from a singular opponent, especially if they timed their attack when another group was going for the same scroll. With how quickly they could travel, they could get this exam over with in under a day.

“There is actually one more stipulation you guys should know. Think of it as more of a short-cut, really,” Anko continued, piquing everyone’s interest. “There is one scroll, and *only* one scroll, that will be in the arena. It’s made of gold silk, titled with the kanji ‘Unity’. Any three-man team who finds and wins this scroll doesn’t need to collect any of the other elemental scrolls. Not only do you bypass collecting the scrolls from jonin and other battles, but you do not even need to bring it to the center tower. As soon as you get your hands on it, you get a direct pass to the third exam.”

The crowd grew a little restless at this. A hand shot up, and its owner spoke before being called on. “Will there be a hint as to where it’s hidden?”

Anko smiled. “Hint? It’s right here!” She pulled it out from her hip pack, the golden silk glistening in the afternoon sun. Every pair of eyes went straight to it, the kanji on front luminating its word brighter than the scroll around it. Sasuke sighed. It would be completely unnecessary for him and Naruto to go after that scroll; they would have no problems gathering the other five. But Naruto had a fire in his eyes just like everyone else, fist clenched, completely enthralled with the glory that would come from being the person to collect the *special* scroll.

As Anko began walking through the crowd, Naruto excitedly jabbered, eyes never leaving the scroll’s movement, “We should go for it, Sasuke! The other scrolls would be too easy- this one is bound to be much more of a challenge to get our hands on!”

No sooner had he said it did Anko place the scroll directly into Naruto’s hand. “Hold this for me, will you?”

“Eh?” Naruto stuttered in surprise, his eyes wide at the golden scroll in his palm.

Anko turned around, addressing the crowd. “Anyone who wins this scroll from these two will immediately pass their second exam!”

…Of course.

Naruto wailed his surprise. Anko smiled innocently at them. “Likewise,” she said more quietly, directed only at Naruto and Sasuke, “If you lose this scroll even for a second, you two will both fail.” Sasuke scoffed. He had been hoping to avoid all battle with these genin. Now it would be completely inevitable, judging by the buzz of excitement coming from all around them. Whatever. They’d just have to gather the other scrolls as quickly as possible and keep hidden. Anko turned back to the crowd again, “And if you guys are worried that these two will complete the arena too quickly, don’t lose hope. Their goal is to stay in the exam for the entire five days.” Fucking wonderful. They would have to find a good hiding spot to hunker down in, then- “Having trouble finding them? Perform the hand signs Tiger-Ox-Dog and the scroll will emit a ringing tone to your ears to guide you to it.” Absolutely fantastic.

“O-Oi!” Naruto panicked, his grip around the scroll shaking. “Don’t you think this is a little pointed?!”

She only smiled back at him. “All of the Kage and the test makers agreed that you guys would have too easy of a time if you took the test like everyone else. But don’t worry, you don’t have to bother collecting any of the other scrolls. Just hang out for five days, make sure no one else snatches this from you, and you’ll be all set!”

When she smacked his back good-naturedly, Naruto fumbled the scroll. It bounced from hand to hand, and he only just barely managed to grab it before it hit the ground. It was going to be a long five days.

_o-O-o_

Not twenty minutes into the exam and they were already bombarded by their first boastful opponents. Ridiculous, really, to think their measly team was strong enough to win the scroll from them when they were both at full power. It would be smarter, Sasuke thought, to wait until a few days into the exam, when they were both exhausted from being chased by everyone else.

They stormed up to them, three shinobi so young that it had to be their first time taking the exam, voices loud and bragging that they were going to win the scroll. Even Naruto clicked his tongue at them, pointing lazily and squinting, “*You three* are gunna try to get our scroll from us?”

“Don’t underestimate us!” the one to the right warned, and Sasuke could see by the burns on his arms that he was a fire style user, even though his insignia on his headband was of a rock. Not a great one, considering those were the burns of self-inflicted practice. Judging by his sleeveless outfit, he would fight by encasing his arms in fire.

“We graduated top three of our class!” Said the one in the middle. Sasuke couldn’t decipher his or the other’s style.

Sighing, Naruto turned to Sasuke. “Should we fight them?”

It was a dumb thing to ask. They wouldn’t have much of a choice; these three were planning on trying something regardless. “I don’t know if you can, Naruto. Didn’t you graduate bottom of our class?”

This pulled all of Naruto’s focus. His fist was shaking in Sasuke’s face. “*You bastard*-”

Sasuke would have felt bad if he hadn’t given the three Iwa ninja a chance to land a hit while Naruto was distracted. They were at least wise enough to see the opening Sasuke gave them. The one on the left’s jutsu became apparent as a hand shaped ball of rock came soaring at Naruto’s back, the fingers of it reaching out toward Naruto’s hip pack.

Naruto sensed it just in time to twist around and face the rock with his knee. The rock crumbled at the force of the hit, but Naruto was left hopping in place, his hands attempting to sooth the pain. “Ah- *ouch, ouch, ouch*- that was a bad idea-”

“No shit,” Sasuke deadpanned. Two more hand shaped rocks punched out from the genin’s palms, attempting to grab at Naruto again, who dodged them easily.

Sasuke’s eyes caught the fire-user’s disappearance just a split second before a wave of water started rising from the ground itself. Both he and Naruto leapt up to escape it. Sasuke’s suspicion about how the fire-user manipulated his jutsu proved true; fire encased his arms up to his elbow, making it impossible to guard his oncoming punch. Instead, Sasuke twisted himself midair to avoid it. There were plenty of opportunities to dispose of these nuisances from up above, but Sasuke wasn’t going to be so cruel. He had no interest in this fight.

It was a good team composition, fire, earth, and water, even if they were perhaps a bit too conceded. Sasuke could use the water-user to his advantage against the fire, and both water and earth were weak to his lightning. In his mind’s eye, he pictured the battle. It would be over quickly, even if he was giving them every handicap. But he wasn’t going to battle them. It would be a waste of chakra, especially considering he already knew how it would play out.

The fire-user fell back into position with his teammates, all three staring up at where both he and Naruto landed on a tree branch. With the slightest twinge to Sasuke’s eye, the Iwa team all froze, sinking to their knees.

They were unconscious from just that. Naruto jutted his bottom lip out. “Don’t *hurt* them.”

Like Sasuke needed telling of that. “They’re not seeing anything bad. All I’m doing is making them wander together in darkness for a day.”

“Isn’t that a bit too long?”

“If it was any shorter, they’d try to come after us again.”

“We should probably find someplace safe to leave them. There are too many wild animals around.”

But minutes after tucking the three unconscious bodies into a sturdy cave, they were being ambushed again. It seemed that the scroll did not make noise to anyone but the sign weaver, which meant that they would have no warning when they were being hunted. That damn scroll. And damn Kakashi, as well.

Before they were let into the forest, Anko gave them another stipulation, reading a piece of parchment from the Hokage himself. The scroll was not allowed to leave the arena, which meant Sasuke’s first plan to deposit it in another dimension for a few days was impossible. These exams were turning out to be more trouble than they were worth. Sasuke was at least grateful that, whether they passed this section or not, he would be free of the burden of the third task. The point of taking them was to get Naruto through the first two tests where he would need a teammate. He’d be free to dip out of the last portion, the individual battles. He had no intention of fighting any of these kids. By the end of this second stage, he would have given plenty of evidence of his ability to work with Naruto.

By nightfall, the pair of them had been tracked down by no less than fifteen different teams. Naruto seemed to enjoy the excitement, so Sasuke let each battle happen naturally. No one came close to getting their hands on the scroll, even at one point in the late afternoon when three separate teams attacked at once. There had been a kunoichi from the Aburame clan, though, whose bugs had to be dealt with by his Amaterasu.

The number of challengers dwindled as the day went on. Hopefully all of those foolish enough to try to come for the scroll as a first option were persuaded to not try again by how easily they had all been defeated. The following days to come were the ones to be more careful about, Sasuke told Naruto as they found a hollowed tree to hide in for the night. Their opponents would get smarter on the second and third days, and on the fourth and fifth only more desperate. There were a few fail-safes they managed to come up with.

With Naruto’s Sage Mode activated to sense oncoming threats and Sasuke’s genjutsu disguising their hiding spot as a full healthy tree, they were able to drop their guard slightly as the night came. They had fished in the river and cooked their dinner using Fire Style to avoid prolonged smoke and were picking the last of the flesh off of the bones as they talked through strategy.

They had exhausted the real conversation. Naruto fell back against the wood behind him. “’Think my last defense would be to just shove the thing down my pants. No one would want to go for it then.”

Scoffing, Sasuke shook his head. “Dumbass.”

“You wouldn’t be able to do that, though. All of the girls would probably fight each other over who would get to take it out.” Sasuke aimed a hard flick at Naruto’s temple in retaliation, but Naruto caught it easily. He sighed, laughing slightly at himself before collapsing over sideways into Sasuke. “Do you think we’ll get to sleep?”

The closeness put Sasuke more on edge than the threat of being ambushed. He uncorked his water flask for a drink. “We should try to take turns. It’ll be exhausting enough even with a full eight hours.”

Humming, Naruto readjusted himself, scooting more perpendicular to let his head fall down to rest atop Sasuke’s thigh. “Okay. I call first dibs.” He was staring up, lax eyes, presently the orange color that came with his Sage Mode, half lidded.

Sasuke could see where Naruto’s mind was wandering to. He swallowed his mouthful of water, making sure to give the dazed look in his lap an unimpressed one in response. “Don’t get distracted.”

“’M not,” Naruto slurred. He pointed over his head off to Sasuke’s left, then down past his feet “There’s a team about 30 meters that way, but they aren’t travelling this direction. And 45 meters over there another team is camping.” He then pointed just behind Sasuke’s right shoulder. “I think one team found a Jonin with scrolls, because they’re battling about 70 meters that way.” Sage mode sure was useful. Then Naruto’s finger was in his face. “*You* better not get distracted. I can’t sense where people are when I’m asleep.”

“I can sense when people are affected by my genjutsu,” Sasuke stated, still not convinced Naruto wasn’t going to attempt something. Naruto was still staring at him, but his lips had fallen into a straight line. Furrowing his brows, Sasuke had to ask, “What?”

“You don’t like using genjutsu,” he stated in response.

Tensing up, Sasuke confirmed it, “No.” Of course he didn’t. All of the horrible things he was made to see, to relive. He understood why Itachi did it, but he didn’t like to think about how awful the experience was. More so he did not want to dig into the basket case about how he felt about Itachi doing that to him in the first place- not since he learned of his brother’s truth. Sasuke had spent too long hating Itachi in his life, and he had no more energy to be doing so in his death when the truth was so horrible. But still, those days he spent in that Tsukuyomi…

A hand reached up and brushed his hair back out of his face. “You don’t have to keep using it,” Naruto’s voice was as gentle as his touch. “We can handle beating these guys without you needing to use it so much.”

Sasuke pulled his face up, and Naruto’s hand fell out of reach. “I don’t want to actually fight these kids.”

“You’re underestimating them.”

“It’s not about that,” Sasuke interjected. He hadn’t intended to explain, but Naruto’s silence nagged him. He found it difficult to look back down in his lap. “Don’t you notice how young they are?”

He could hear the way Naruto was frowning in the tone of his voice. “Some of them are older than us.” That wasn’t the point. But, of course, Naruto couldn’t see that. “We were their age last time, too.”

“That’s what bothers me,” Sasuke had to say. Naruto’s head felt heavy in his lap all of a sudden. “We’re allowed to kill each other in here.”

“Well, people don’t, though-”

“Gaara did,” Sasuke spat before he could control his tongue. Naruto went silent. Letting out a harsh sigh, Sasuke pressed forward. “It doesn’t matter if people do or not, the fact remains that these exams are about testing who the best killer is. Who would be best to indoctrinate into fighting wars for their arbitrary country to murder everyone else in the other arbitrary countries. And doing it while we’re all so young is how they get away with it. It’s all treated like some honor, being turned into the best human weapon for the *Will of Fire* to wield at its own leisure.”

Well. There was that. He hadn’t meant to monologue. He knew it would be a lot for Naruto to take in. He wasn’t unaware that Naruto had been brainwashed into all of that crap with the rest of them. Sure enough, the cogs in his blond head had started turning past Sasuke’s interference. “But the Will of Fire is about the desire for us all to protect one another. It’s about love being the key to peace.”

“Is it?” Sasuke challenged.

“Yeah,” Naruto attested. “It’s always how I’ve lived.”

Speaking from his chest, Sasuke countered, “Love is the easiest thing to manipulate.”

“I know.” He said it firmly, and one glance down at his solid gaze confirmed that they were both thinking of the same thing. Sasuke’s life was nothing but evidence of it. So was Itachi’s.

The comfort of being known softened Sasuke’s edges somewhat. He swallowed hard. “Your version of the Will of Fire is the only one that I’ve ever seen done right.” Even Itachi’s had been… “You said it earlier today. What difference is there between the countries? Konoha’s Will of Fire has been limited to the confines of the wall- no. It hadn’t even extended to the Uchiha. We were ostracized, and then when we decided to fight back against it, the Will of Fire convinced the Elders that their own love of their version of the village was more worth protecting. They convinced Itachi that in order to protect his love for his clan, he needed to kill them.” Sasuke had to stop thinking about it. He mentally set the subject down, circling back. “Everything in my life that I have loved has been manipulated under the guise of the Will of Fire. It’s awful.”

It was why for so long he had tried to cut all love out of his life. After the loss of his family, his clan, the pain he felt from all of that lost love drove him away from forming more connections. He severed the strands of thread tying him down of his own accord, on his own terms, before they were ripped from him like the others. Finding out Itachi had been manipulating those frayed, broken threads for so long, and then that Konoha had been puppeteering his brother the whole time… Even that man who had called himself Madara, Obito, had used what was left of Sasuke’s love for his own goals.

Sasuke was sick of it. He had told himself that he was free of the constraints of love so many times. He wasn’t, of course. On his lap, Naruto had a crease between his brows, a soft,

concerned frown on his lips. Doing his best not to spiral, Sasuke blinked his eyes away from the intense look and continued, "Throughout all of its history, Konoha's been using the Will of Fire as an excuse to attack other countries, deluding their shinobi into thinking murdering people and dying in turn was for the betterment of the people they love. But you don't think like that."

No, Naruto didn't think like that. Naruto had never killed anyone. Sasuke had, but only Danzo, an Akatsuki member who had come at him first, and a handful of samurai in self-defense. Despite his speech, he was not against his own revenge. This world needed revolution, and Sasuke's way would certainly have been effective. Obito had gotten there first, even though it had not been his plan, per say. Unite the world against a common threat. There was still more to do, though. Break it down, then rebuild. But Sasuke's method would be bloody. Naruto's would not be. If there was a chance for that revolution to happen without more blood, Sasuke would take it. If Naruto succeeded, it would be the best course of action. And he *was* going to succeed, Sasuke knew.

Because Naruto had promised it.

"Kids shouldn't be killing each other," Sasuke established.

Eventually, Naruto answered. "…No. They shouldn't."

Sasuke's fingers were carding through Naruto's hair, but he had no memory of when that had started. Naruto fell asleep not long after.

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He had brought his Susanoo out in the hopes of giving Naruto more time to sleep, but the group of Suna ninja who attacked them in the middle of the night were too noisy. They hammered at the purple bones pointlessly, somehow thinking their fists and kunai were powerful enough to pierce its guard.

"Can you guys be a little quieter?" He had called out to them. "He's trying to sleep."

That, of course, had only made them angrier, and they began flinging their individual ninjutsu in an attempt to budge the immobile perfect defense. Eventually even Naruto couldn't sleep through their racket (which was saying something) and he blinked his eyes open slowly, making sense of the purple ribcage surrounding them. His head had still been resting on Sasuke's thigh, though he had rolled over on it so many times throughout the night that it was miraculous he wasn't on the other side of the forest by now. Frowning up at Sasuke, Naruto rasped, "Were you even going to wake me?"

"No point." Sasuke replied. Sure enough, the Suna team continued their pointless attacks. What a waste of energy. "But now that you're up, we should get going." Having had plenty of opportunities to look the three assailants in their eyes, Sasuke initiated his genjutsu. Standing up, Sasuke brushed off the back of his cloak. "They're going to keep attacking this spot for a while. Are you ready?"

They hightailed out of their position unbeknownst to the Suna ninja, who had continued to see their image as it had been. They were now attacking the defenseless hollowed tree stump, pulverizing it to bits.

It was still the middle of the night, several hours before sunrise. Sasuke hadn't slept, so Naruto insisted on them finding another hiding spot for him to catch a few hours in. It was pointless; Sasuke knew he wouldn't be able to sleep. But he went along with it anyway and they found a cave. He tried to shut his eyes up against a wall, but Naruto had dragged him until he was resting against his shoulder instead, and it was more comfortable, so he stayed.

As the sun was just rising, Naruto shook Sasuke awake (a term to be used loosely, considering how he was hardly actually sleeping) due to a team that was running straight toward them. The following day might have given them less opponents, but Sasuke's theory about the battles being harder proved true. It still wasn't much of a challenge, but there had been two separate teams who knew how to break his genjutsu that they had to find other means of slipping away from. This day's bunch fought smarter, actually approaching them with a plan, but only just barely. None of them had any form of Plan B. Sasuke wished he knew a little bit more about Sound Technique; it would've been nice if they had been able to duplicate the jutsu onto another scroll to use as a distraction. There would be an infinite number of ways to use that to their advantage.

Being attacked so frequently, regardless of how amateur the battles were for the two of them to handle, was tiring. Though it was still more annoying than difficult. Admittedly the vast majority of genin who approach them had an admirable amount of skill- Sasuke wasn't so pretentious as to not see that- but both he and Naruto were well past genin level; they both worked with S ranked jutsu regularly. So it was obnoxious to constantly be berated by people who genuinely thought their average kekkei genkai was strong enough to face them head on with no prior thought.

Nearing late afternoon, Sasuke was remorse to encounter another challenger standing brashly and openly up on a tree branch. She had no teammates around her, as far as Sasuke could see, though, so perhaps the other two were hidden and would at least give them a bit of a trial. Next to him, Naruto pointed up at her. "O-Oi! You're Hinata's sister! Han… Hana…"

"Hanabi," she introduced herself, and Sasuke's brain doubled back as he placed her relation to her sister. Hinata… the Hyuuga he didn't remember going to the academy with? Once it clicked, Sasuke searched for her eyes. Byakugan. He must have been pretty exasperated to not have noticed that right away. Slowly, Hanabi's fist came out in front of her, and she was raising her first two fingers, formally requesting battle. "I wish to battle Sasuke-san."

Searching her face for her true nature, Sasuke only found determination. "How are you certain that I am the one with the scroll?"

"I'm not here to try to win the scroll," she revealed to Sasuke's mild surprise. "I've heard many stories about battling a Sharingan user. I have a lot of respect for you, Sasuke-san. There aren't any other Sharingan users left, and I might not have another opportunity to face you. Even if my team passes this exam, there is no guarantee we will be paired to fight each other in the third round."

She had a completely different disposition from what Sasuke had seen of Hinata back on his birthday, and she even differed from what he remembered of Neji. Still, Sasuke turned an eye to Naruto, who confirmed for him, “She’s being honest. Her teammates aren’t anywhere around here.”

With this, the corner of Sasuke’s lip curved upward. “Alright, then.” He reached into his cloak and pulled out the golden scroll, handing it over to Naruto for safe keeping. He did trust that she was being honest about wanting nothing more than to test Byakugan versus Sharingan, but he wasn’t going to wager losing the exam for it. He activated his base Sharingan and returned the hand sign to her. “Your move.”

She didn’t waste time coming in closer. Sasuke knew nothing about this girl’s abilities, but all Hyuuga were trained in Gentle Fist. Being of the main branch, she most certainly was gunning for his chakra points in the same way. It would be a question of how fast she was, if she’d be able to out-speed him. Going into a battle against a Hyuuga with taijutsu only was indeed very foolish. Letting them get into close-range was downright idiotic.

But this battle wasn’t about Sasuke versus Hanabi. This was Sharingan versus Byakugan. If she had other jutsu, he didn’t think she would be using it. So Sasuke limited himself to not use anything other than his right eye. He allowed her inward and got a taste of her speed, only just narrowly dodging her palm to his inner arm. Her next attack came at his left side’s abdomen, which he slapped away in time to avoid a vital chakra point blockage. As she came forward again, it was evident that while Sasuke’s eyes had the speed to see her, he was outnumbered on limbs to block with, having to get creative and flipping over to her back side.

She eight-trigramed, and Sasuke backed away out of her reach. Not wanting to dishonor her anymore by just playing defense, he came at her with a kick, but she was ready to catch him. Sasuke only just barely moved her fingertips aside to avoid her blocking those chakra points on him. He tried to catch her eye, but she expertly had them lowered to his chest. When they broke apart, Sasuke had to admire, “Smart of you to know how to avoid eye contact at such close range.”

“I can break genjutsu with my chakra control,” she told him, and Sasuke had no doubt about that. “But even the split second it would take to do so could be fatal.”

It could. She had been taught well. He continued to play with her- because that was what this battle had felt like. He couldn’t miss the way she was smiling, even after he managed to knock her onto the ground with a particular kick. Allowing her to get back up, Sasuke engaged her again. Just as he was thinking that she was a bright girl, she actually connected her fingers to one of the chakra points near his knee. He felt his leg give a harsh twinge at the loss of energy to it. It slowed him down a considerable amount.

They battled for long enough that another team had found them. Sasuke idly had a fraction of his focus on them, banking on Naruto to handle the new group. If needed, he would have paused the spar. But he could hear Naruto waving the new group off. “Shh. Can’t you see they’re sparring?”

“W-Wha-?” the highly confused Konoha ninja sputtered. “More the reason we should try to get the scroll now!”

But Naruto continued to brush them off, motioning for them to take a seat on the dirt with him. “Just sit here and watch this for a bit. I wanna see how it ends.” It was just a strange enough interaction that the would-be enemies slowly took his advice, sitting down next to Naruto in the makeshift audience section. Sasuke and Hanabi continued their spar. Sasuke did have half of a mind to worry that Naruto was too distracted, but let his caution fall after he saw Naruto bat one of the genin’s hand away from his hip pack, eyes still glued on the battle and absentmindedly telling him, “Don’t make me summon a clone to clobber you.”

Minutes into the fight after that, Sasuke began to admire her form. The Hyuuga Clan spared no expense on mastering the basics; perhaps they had to, considering how precise Gentle Fist was. She even had the sense to distract him with a few shuriken, get him into the position she needed him to be in. This was a tactic the Uchiha clan taught as well; Sasuke wondered if it was a piece of their distantly shared ancestry, or if it was just something that she was smart enough to come up with on her own.

The more Sasuke fought her, the more he appreciated her. He would have been lying to say he never wanted to battle a Hyuuga for the concept alone before. It was a shame that he had never gotten a chance to fight Neji to fulfill that. He didn’t have much of a thought on Hinata- appeared to be too timid for him to want to, being he had no memory of her at all until last month. If she had never given him a reason to notice her in the past, she was probably not the confrontational type. He couldn’t picture her finding enjoyment in a battle like this, which, to her credit, he did not think was a bad thing.

Hanabi sure was the confrontational type, though. Perhaps in a few years, once she has truly honed and mastered her skill, Sasuke would follow back up with her with another battle request. As it was, Sasuke was sticking to taijutsu, keeping in close range for her, and she was able to close off quite a few of his chakra points. He had been careful with his arm, because if she closed off even one major point he would lose a huge offensive and defensive advantage.

But even with how careful he had been, her hand honed in on his inner elbow. They had been sparring for long enough. With a twinge to his left eye, he teleported a few feet behind her in place of a broken stick. She twirled around in surprise at his quickness. Breathing heavy, Sasuke rested his hand on his hip. “We’ll say you won that spar,” he told her.

She dropped her stance, but she had a put-out look to her face. “You were going easy on me.”

“You said you wanted to battle a Sharingan user, so I used only my Sharingan,” Sasuke explained. “That last move was my Rinnegan. You forced me to break my limitations, and therefore, you won.”

She still didn’t look pleased. “You were not using your Sharingan to its full ability. You did not try to use genjutsu.”

“I don’t like genjutsu,” Sasuke stated simply.

“And you’re only using three tomoe.” So she knew about the levels of the Sharingan that well. Sasuke pondered this with mild concern. She couldn’t have been old enough to have needed to learn so in depth about the Uchiha’s eyes. She had to have been, what? A toddler when his clan was killed?

Of course, Sasuke remembered learning about the Byakugan from his dad. It was something every Uchiha was taught. Even after the two clans became allies under the village, they still kept their powerful eyes out for any dissent, preparing themselves in case of emergency. Perhaps she had been taught about it not out of precaution, but tradition. “This won’t be the last time we fight,” Sasuke promised. “Train more and get better so that next time I’ll be forced to use a more advanced eye.”

Her lips fell into a tight line. She was working through his words; Sasuke wondered how she would take them. Perhaps it had been a little insulting, but Sasuke had not meant them that way. It was a fact. She had not been quick enough for him to need to use his Mangekyou. But he still hadn’t been quick enough to dodge her last attack, in turn. At least not with the chakra points she had managed to block on him. If she had a temperament, she would continue attacking.

She surprised him by bowing deeply. “Thank you, Sasuke-san. I will train hard for our next encounter.” Disappearing into the trees, she left, true to her word about not wanting to make an attempt at the scroll. Smart girl, indeed.

Behind him, though, were three not-so-smart genin, now standing back up and demanding Naruto hand over the scroll. Whatever. Sasuke left it to Naruto to deal with them.

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The third day brought them more headache. Three days of constant alert had certainly worked its toll on Sasuke's body. Naruto was just as animated as ever, him and his boundless energy, but Sasuke didn't have such a plethora of chakra to rely on, and constantly using his eyes drained him. Even when he was every country's most prominent bingo book entry, Sasuke had never been so avidly and consistently targeted. It didn't matter that each opponent was so far below their skill level; with the sheer number of them, Sasuke was exhausted. By the third day, they had started reencountering teams they had already beaten, who had given a foolish second attempt.

Not to mention the number of teams solely attacking them for the glory of winning the golden scroll. They were milling around about an hour out of the center tower. It wasn't ideal to be so close to the center, but that was where a Konoha team had caught up to them. That Konoha team hadn't been much of a battle at all, but it was enough to keep them stationary for a moment so that another particular team ran into them.

As they were situating the unconscious Konoha team under some bushes for safe keeping, a hand swiped just centimeters away from his cheek, Sasuke only barely dodging it in time. The hairs on his skin prickled from the familiar sensation of lightning release. Sharingan already out, he took in the sparks coming from the fingertips so near his face. "Found you," a kunoichi was smirking at him.

Deftly, Sasuke quickly shoved her away from him with a firm palm to her midriff. He gave her a quick once over; her Kumo headband pushed back her large head of dark curly hair, her challenging eyes alight with excitement at having found them. Sasuke huffed a glare at Naruto, who was supposed to warn him of any approaching enemies. Naruto startled, then laughed nervously, "I think we accidentally strolled into these guys' path during the last battle!"

Great. Judging by this kunoichi's enthusiasm, it was hard to believe she ran into them by accident. But her teammates were above them, looking shocked. One with close-cropped hair called out, "Riki! We already agreed that we weren't going to go after the golden scroll!"

The blow Sasuke had done to her stomach wasn't exceptionally damaging. She stood up straight despite the pain of it. "Yeah, well, that was before they fell right into our laps."

The small one with braids down her back was frowning, but the short-haired one crossed her arms in annoyance, "Come on! We've already got all five of our scrolls! This is pointless!"

They already had their scrolls but this one was still looking for a fight, electricity flowing out from each of her fingertips. Sasuke sighed while Naruto screwed up his face in confusion, "Why would you want to try to go for the scroll when you're only an hour away from passing anyway?"

Gritting her teeth, the lightning began to surge outwards from her fingertips, surrounding her. Deftly, Sasuke eyed the way her own chakra damaged her, burning away flakes of her skin. “Like *you’d* understand,” she darkly brushed the offending question away, and began her attack.

Of course, Sasuke *did* understand. It angered him to hear her say such a thing to Naruto, who likewise knew what it was like to suffer under the need to prove himself. She came at Naruto, but Sasuke was the one who intercepted her, his speed far greater than hers. Her words irked him enough to warrant a blatant physical attack, something he hadn’t done to any of their other opponents so far. She flew sideways, landing hard on the ground. “Both of us understand what it’s like to want to prove your strength,” he told her. She glowered at him in response. “But we are not the opponents to do so on. Go finish your exam. There is plenty of honor to be found that way.”

“Sasuke!” Naruto was whispering into his ear. “That was a bit rough, don’t you think?”

It wasn’t, Sasuke could tell. With the way that kunoichi was gritting her teeth, she would not be one to want him to go easy on her. He did not want to fight anyone in this arena, but this seemed to be something that this girl had to get out of her system. The lightning release was not the only thing about her that Sasuke could relate to. Or rather, that he *used* to relate to.

She was standing up again, her wild chakra emitting from her hands even more powerfully than before. “Don’t underestimate me!”

As expected, she was not going to step away without an honorable fight. At the moment, Naruto had the scroll. Something about her drew Sasuke into her. “Naruto,” he called. “I’ve got this one.”

With a great sigh, Naruto shrugged, “Alright.”

Angered to be disrespected by a solo fight, the kunoichi- Riki, her teammate had called her- tried to aim another attack at Naruto while his back was turned. Sasuke had anticipated it, so he caught her again with the same tactic, which he knew would anger her even more. Her lightning had encased her, so it was a bit risky for a physical attack, but Sasuke could see the weak spots in it and managed to avoid its danger.

Just as he came at her, a shuriken rushed toward the back of his head. In one movement, Sasuke shoved the lightning user to the ground, then flipped around to block the weapon with his sword. The short-haired kunoichi was leaping down to aid her teammate, cursing, “Dammit, Riki. You’re gunna get your ass beat.”

“I don’t need your help, Eiko!” Riki spat at her from where she lay curled on the dirt.

“Whatever,” the shorthaired girl, Eiko scoffed. “All I want is to get out of this damn forest, and you’re over here picking fights with *Sasuke Uchiha*, of all people.”

“I’ll get us out of this forest quicker with that golden scroll!” Riki promised, and she made her next move, quickly circling around where her teammate had been trying to shield her behind her body. She aimed her attack directly at Sasuke.

Who dodged her as easily as if she was a snowball. “Listen to your teammate. You’re wasting time, here,” he instructed as she stumbled to avoid colliding with a tree.

With a scoff, she bit back at him, “Shut up!”

“You’re a bigger idiot than I thought if you think you can take him on by yourself!” Eiko groaned, and Sasuke was glad that at least one of them was smart enough to know their limits. “We’re strongest as a team. The only hope we have here is if we take him on together.”

The logic of it wasn’t completely lost in her ego, Sasuke was surprised to see. Riki punched the trunk of the tree behind her bitterly. “Fine. Soriko, come on.” Atop of the tree, the short kunoichi with the long braids startled at being addressed. “We’ll use *that* formation. Are you ready?”

“Okay,” she said blandly, hopping down to the ground.

When she landed, Sasuke’s vision glimmered with chakra. Foolish. How absolutely idiotic of them to think that would work. Behind him, Sasuke assessed Naruto, and sure enough a moment later his chakra surged back to normal levels. Ghosts of lightning tipped shuriken surrounded them, a sight that Sasuke rolled his eyes at. Whatever. He’d play along for a moment.

With his Sharingan, the vast number of weapons in the air was so inconsequential. Only about a quarter of them were real, being thrown at him by the shorthaired one. He was able to dodge and deflect them with an almost boring ease. Sasuke humored the attack, wanting to see where this plan of theirs was heading. The shorthaired kunoichi appeared to be a weapon specialist, judging by the number of specialty knives she was throwing at him. Her, and the lightning user, and the third…

It came to a great surprise to the Kumo team when Sasuke finally ignored the onslaught of fake weapons showering him to catch the lightning tipped hand by the wrist before it punctured his back. Really, how dumb were these three? “Did you really think you’d be able to use genjutsu on us?” he scolded, his Sharingan glaring them all down, keeping his hold on his attacker’s wrist firm to keep her in place. “You, genjutsu user,” he addressed the girl with the braids, who took a step back at being singled out. “You have to be aware of your opponents’ chakra levels to see if they’ve broken through it or not before continuing the illusion. I am an Uchiha, a clan notorious for mastering genjutsu with eyes that give us a natural advantage both for and against it. And him?” He gestured to where Naruto was resting against a tree trunk. “It’s common knowledge that he is a fully realized jinchuuriki. It is near impossible to keep him under a genjutsu if you don’t simultaneously capture the bijuu in it as well.”

The skin of her cheeks darkened. Sasuke could tell she wasn’t the confrontational type who would be overly angered at being lectured. The weapon specialist was blinking at him in surprise, a sword in each hand.

He focused on her next, ignoring the way the lightning user was struggling to get out of the grasp he had on her wrist. “And you’re a weapon’s specialist. You are holding those swords

in the wrong position. Not all swords can be held the same; those ones have a double edge. It's dangerous to cross them over your chest like that. If your wrists are slightly too weak when your opponent attacks, the swords will fall back onto your vital spots."

The struggling kunoichi in his hand attempted again to free herself, this time surging her lightning throughout her hands, using her free one to try to slice at his wrist. Knowing what her tactic was going to be, Sasuke matched the electricity within himself to her frequency, and her offense was nullified.

"And you," he lectured her. "Lightning style is just as much of a double-edged sword." He lifted her easily, nodding to the burns she had inflicted on her arms. "When you use it, you have to be careful to flow your chakra through each individual cell of your body, or else you will end up hurting yourself with your own attack. Likewise, it is important to know your opponent's chakra nature. Unlike other natures, when two lightning users battle, it's completely possible that neither will have the ability to injure the other. If you can match your opponent's frequency, you can nullify their attack. It comes down to whose chakra is more powerful. In this instance," he demonstrated with a surge of his own, flowing his electricity through his entire body, just barely an iota more powerful than she was capable of, "it would be me."

Her body jerked from the electrocution. He dropped her. Her teeth were gritted. Unlike her teammates, she definitely was the type to resent being lectured. It was an incredibly childish trait to have. At that thought, something horrible manifested low in his chest.

She *was* a child. Sasuke couldn't imagine her to be older than thirteen, nor her teammates. She was caught up in the glory of the contest, of being the strongest killer she possibly could be. Lightning, weapons, genjutsu, and a desire to prove themself. It pained him to see the connections. They were children. Everyone in this exam was a child. And so, he contended, was he. With the eyes of his dead brother, he could see too much.

Sickened from the fight, Sasuke walked away toward Naruto. He was shouted at by the lightning user, Riki, "We're not done!"

"There is no sense in pointless battles," Sasuke raised his voice back at her. "Jumping headfirst into unnecessary conflict does nothing but weaken you. You have your scrolls. Go complete your mission." When he turned to face her, he was not surprised to see her particular expression. The look she gave him was but a pane of glass. Her desire to know her strength, to not be viewed as weak, to prove her worth. Just next to him, he could feel Naruto's warmth. It set his resolve. "I look forward to the next time we cross paths," at his words, she startled, "when you propose me with a proper Seal of Confrontation."

Her thorned exterior melted away slowly, her jaw falling softly. Satisfied, Sasuke did not wait around any longer. He grabbed Naruto by the shoulder, and then they were in place of a distant fallen tree branch some fifty meters west.

Naruto laughed at him for an upwards of an hour afterwards, insisting that Sasuke would make a good teacher if he just learned how to not be so surly.

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They had also run into Konohamaru and his team on that third day, and he and Naruto spent a good twenty minutes throwing challenges and insults at each other. Thankfully, they did not actually battle. Konohamaru had already collected his scrolls and kept insisting that he *could* get the golden scroll from Naruto if he *wanted* to, but it would be a waste of time, so he wasted more time smugly detailing how exactly he'd do it instead. It was a ridiculous conversation, Naruto shaking his fist and getting riled up, rebutting every one of Konohamaru's plans with his own exhaustive words of how he'd counter them. Sasuke was too tired to deal with it, so he started walking away, and he got a good twenty meters' distance before Naruto noticed that he was even gone.

Day four might have been the worst of them. The teams left were so desperate that a few managed to come close to getting at the scroll. A lot of them knew to not look Sasuke in the eyes by that point, which was frustrating because it meant they had to knock them out by other means. Or else get creative about winning eye contact. Sasuke was counting down the hours until he would be rid of this forest for the rest of his life.

By dawn on the fifth day, he was ready to camp the pair of them in his Susanoo. Surely if they both just sat in the defense and didn't fight back, anyone still left in the exam would bore of fruitlessly attacking it. But Naruto wouldn't be able to sit still for that long. And with how exhausted Sasuke was, and how desperate the remaining teams had gotten, perhaps if enough of them attacked in unison they'd actually be able to pierce it. And then Sasuke would be too spent to be of much help to Naruto.

They kept on the move as soon as Sasuke woke up. They were being followed, and it became more of a test of speed than anything else. With the Rinnegan, Sasuke could teleport for as far as his eye could see, but the technique still left him winded after using it, especially with another person in tow. Thankfully, Naruto was able to lend him generous supplies of his endless chakra, which meant that they could clear the arena in about an hour. By the end of it, even Naruto was out of breath.

Just after midday, a puff of smoke appeared in front of where they had just allowed themselves a break from travelling. "Boy, do you guys move fast!" It was the exam's proctor, Anko. She was also breathing hard. "Good thing you guys stopped for a second so I could catch you!"

"What's up?" Naruto turned his head to the sky, judging the time by the sun. "It's noon, right? We've got 24 more hours left, and this second test is in the bag!"

"Actually," She brought her watch up to her face from where her hands were resting on her knees, "It's more like 23 and a half hours, now. I've been trying to get you guys for thirty minutes."

Sasuke swallowed the mouthful of water he had been drinking, furrowing his eyebrows. "What did you need to tell us?"

"Well," she stood up straight, "there's been a change of rules in the exams that you guys need to know about."

“What?!” Naruto wailed, and the hairs on the back of Sasuke’s neck stood up. He didn’t have the reason yet, but he knew whatever she was going to say was bound to make him livid. “What do you mean, ‘a change in the rules’? Is that even allowed this late in the test?!”

She held up a finger at him. “Of course it is! These are the Chunin exams!” Naruto gripped at his head, his anxiety overwhelming. “Turns out, you guys *do* have to pass this exam the same way all of the other teams have to. Standard rules apply. Better get to collecting!”

He had been right; this reveal had made him extremely angry. Next to him, Naruto was screaming out his agony. “*What*?! We have to collect the other scrolls?! That’s not fair- you can’t change our rules on us this late in the test! We’ve only got a day left!”

Through his teeth, Sasuke laid it out for him, “They *didn’t* change the rules this late. They had this planned for us the whole time.” This did nothing to quiet the indignant noises his teammate was making.

“You’re just as perceptive as I thought you’d be,” Anko said unsteadily, their shared history with Orochimaru evident in her underlying tone. She had to be aware that he was the one who removed her of her curse mark, right? Sasuke couldn’t tell; with her personality, she probably *could* be so casual with him despite it. It was weird, either way. “Well, I’ll be going, then. Good luck!”

She disappeared. Naruto was flailing his limbs in frustration. “We have to collect all those scrolls in a day! We don’t even know if there are any left! Why did they wait to tell us this? We could have gotten them all forever ago!”

“Calm down, Naruto,” Sasuke insisted. “They waited until the last day to tell us this to give us a challenge. We needed a shorter time limit, and they wanted us to be worn out. There is most definitely at least one of each scroll left for us to get; they wouldn’t set us up to fail like that. We’ve been all over this map; we know where the jonin are. We’ll be able to pass.”

Naruto’s forehead was against Sasuke’s shoulder, and Sasuke could feel him pouting. “Why do they have to single us out so much?”

That answer was obvious to everyone but Naruto. Sasuke used his most convenient weapon to bring Naruto back to him. “Do you want to give up?”

Predictably, Naruto perked back to his usual self, fist clenched. “Of course not!”

Too easy. “Then go back into Sage mode and lead us to the scrolls. If we pass any genin along the way, we’ll be able to scavenge some from them.”

“Sasuke!” Sasuke narrowed his eyes at his tone. “We’re not gunna steal from the genin!”

This was a peculiar thing for Naruto to scold him for. “Why not?”

“Because it wouldn’t be right!” That hadn’t been something Sasuke thought Naruto cared about, not with the current circumstances. “It’s only fair if we go for the jonin. I don’t want to

interfere with anyone else's chances at making it to the next round. And we don't know what types of scrolls they have, or even if they have any to begin with. It would waste time."

Sighing, Sasuke let him have the argument, though he had provisions. "Fine. But if we're missing any other scrolls come dawn, then the genin are fair game." It was true that Sasuke did not want to fight the genin, but getting Naruto through this exam was more important than that. Plus, they would be able to swipe their scrolls without injuring them, anyway.

Naruto had to agree, his eyes falling shut. "I suppose so." When he opened his eyes again, an orange flush of color was on his eyelids. He took a moment to assess the surrounding woods. "Oh!" His attention was grabbed by something that excited him. "Shikamaru's in here!"

Shikamaru? Sasuke's suspicions doubled. If he was here today, there was no doubt that they had increased the ability of the guards around the scrolls. He hadn't been in the forest yesterday- or even in the morning, when Naruto scanned the land before they went running around. No doubt he was here specifically for Sasuke and Naruto to battle. He wondered for a moment, fearfully, if anyone else from their graduating class would make an appearance. But Naruto had not shouted anyone else's name, so it was probably safe to assume they wouldn't.

Calculating their chances, Sasuke decided, "We should head for him, first."

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The first time in the exam that Sasuke brought out his Mangekyou was when he was surveying the grounds around Shikamaru. There was a chest filled with scrolls, seemingly unprotected as Shikamaru sat idly on the ground against a tree. Sasuke would not fall for that trap blindly. He could see the chakra-ladened shadow in a ring around the chest, a few meters off.

Sasuke had never battled Shikamaru even back in their school years, but he was aware of the Nara clan's kekkei genkai-like technique. To be safe, he had Naruto debrief him everything he knew about Shikamaru's fighting style. A calculated fighter, of course. It would be wise to assume there was a trap within a trap, probably within another trap for good measure. It was a battle of wits more than one of fists.

Good thing Sasuke had plenty of wits of his own. Fighting smart was the most useful thing Itachi ever taught him.

Getting in and out quick was their only option. He didn't think it would work, but if there was a chance his first option would, it was all for the better. The scrolls piled high in the chest, in plain view. It was an obvious trap, but it wouldn't matter getting out of it so long as the scroll made it. After that, Naruto could handle Shikamaru in hand-to-hand to free him.

In a split second, Sasuke teleported into the place of one of the scrolls. He couldn't turn to see Naruto shove the scroll that appeared back in his place in his pouch because he was already paralyzed. It appeared Shikamaru had also laced his shadow through the pile in the chest that Sasuke was standing on top of.

“I didn’t think you’d go straight for it,” Shikamaru commented in lieu of a greeting as he stood up, and Sasuke’s body mirrored his position. Sasuke didn’t want to waste a moment; the shadow paralyzed his body, but not his eyes. Shikamaru knew to not look into them, but the Amaterasu didn’t require that. If he could make him stumble, even just a little bit, he’d be free.

Almost. At the last possible second, Shikamaru turned their heads, and the black flames engulfed a tree a few meters to the right. Even without that, then, there had to be an object Sasuke could switch with. They were in a forest, after all. But the tree encased in black flames was the only thing he could see. He extinguished it, and but there didn’t seem to be anything he could switch places with over in that direction. Cursing under his breath, Sasuke rested for a moment as much as the paralysis let him. Naruto would come.

And so Naruto did. The clone froze just inches from sending a Rasengan into Shikamaru’s shoulder. From what Sasuke could see, Shikamaru had shadows under every tree branch. Another clone was coming, though, and Sasuke’s head was turned with Shikamaru’s to see it, too, get caught midair. It hit the ground hard enough to pop it.

Naruto had more clones, though, many more. Too many for even the absurd number of chakra-shadows Shikamaru had laid out. In the distraction of them all attacking at once, Sasuke found a rock in the direction Shikamaru had him looking toward. Without a second thought, he switched places with it, glad to be free of that awful jutsu-

Everything around him went black. The sudden blindness had Sasuke’s heart racing; being blind was never a good situation for an Uchiha. What could possibly have made him lose his eyesight so quickly? He tried to jump away, but his feet were rooted to the ground. And then Sasuke noticed with great relief that he wasn’t blind; his could still see his body. It was as if he was stuck in a chasm of darkness, the only thing visible being his own body, and an ominously glowing symbol down at his feet. A seal? Fuck. Sasuke thought back to how strange it was that there hadn’t been anything else on the forest floor for him to teleport to: not a twig in sight. The only thing he could see was that rock, a small boulder just big enough to cover the stepping area of the sealing jutsu.

A trap in a trap. Just when Sasuke thought he had found his exit…

He was wholly dependent on Naruto, now. If only he could escape to one of the other dimensions! But he was holding that stupid scroll, the one that wasn’t allowed to leave the arena. Perhaps if he could move his arm and drop it on the ground. It would be risky. But he had to give Naruto a chance to save him, first. The trouble was that Sasuke had no way of knowing what Naruto was up to outside of the pitch-black seal.

Two minutes. Sasuke would give him two minutes, and then he would do whatever necessary to get out of the seal. He hadn’t used too much chakra, so travelling to and from another dimension shouldn’t take him too long, especially if he went into the volcanic one where time moved twice as fast. He did what he could to amass as much chakra in his allotted short time limit as possible.

He hated being trapped more than anything. He was never a fan of being dependent on anyone else, always needed to be able to take care of himself. It was only Naruto that he

needed to rely on in the moment, but even still. Logically, he knew his entrapment was all fictitious, reliant on not breaking the rules of this stupid exam. He *could* escape this trap easily, had it been a real fight. And he would, damn it, if Naruto didn't hurry up. He had no qualms about dropping the damn scroll and leaving the dimension.

There was no need, thankfully. Behind him, his cloak was being yanked, and Sasuke fell backwards into the world of light. Naruto had saved him within Sasuke's set time limit and was pulling him out of the seal, hurriedly instructing him "Let's go- we've got the scroll-"

Sasuke hadn't enough time to warn him about the chakra under them; he hadn't been able to see it in time, himself, with how blindingly bright it was back in the real realm. But they were caught, *again*, and Sasuke really hated this jutsu. Shikamaru hadn't given them a second, forcing both of their heads down to the ground where there was only dirt.

"When did you learn Fire style?" Shikamaru was casually asking, and it seemed Naruto had used the defense they had come up with to use the light emitted from fire to their advantage.

Despite being caught, Naruto was still able to respond arrogantly, "Can't catch a shadow that's not there, can you?"

"I can manage," Shikamaru retorted.

Sasuke did not want to partake in the banter, but he did want to distract him. "You can't hold this jutsu for too much longer. Once it breaks, we'll be gone."

"Don't worry about that, I've got another seal," Shikamaru promised him, and Sasuke figured as much. "But first I want to let you guys in on a secret. Let's take a look at that scroll you guys got from me." He reached down with his hand, Sasuke and Naruto's following suit. He had Naruto pull out the scroll he had taken after Sasuke switched places with it.

Sasuke heard Naruto let out a wail, and through the corner of his eye he was able to see why. The scroll did not have an element written on it, but instead the word '*Fake'* in bold black penmanship. Damn it. "Fake!? Where're the real ones?!" Naruto panicked.

With an annoyingly cocky tone, Shikamaru teased, "Oh, the real one is in that chest somewhere. That was one of the provisions the proctor insisted on. There's only one left, though." There had to be around a hundred of those damn things in that chest, Sasuke scoffed. "My neck hurts," he droned, sounding bored. He raised their heads again-

And shut his eyes. Sasuke saw black. He really didn't like Shikamaru, he realized. Originally he thought he was indifferent to him, but now he realized that he was just irritating, at the end of it. He wouldn't mind being given the opportunity to land a good punch. So he didn't think Sasuke could escape this now that his eyes were closed? It was apparent Shikamaru had read up plenty about Sasuke's abilities from his bingo book entry. Maybe it was from last year, when he was one of the most wanted traitors, or perhaps even more recently in preparation for this exact battle.

But there were powers Sasuke had that weren't in the bingo book- at least, not under *his* old file. It was clear that Kakashi had told him of some things, but what of the others? All he

needed was a hand to lift…

All three of them started walking forward, closing the distance between them. Sasuke remembered the scenery thanks to his Sharingan having preserved it, and Shikamaru must know the distance between them with his shadow. Any moment, his hand would come up to place the seal… "Well, I guess I'll keep you guys in here for a day, do you think?"

Beside him, he felt Naruto practically growl. "Let us go, Shikamaru. We have to pass this exam!"

"If you can't pass it on your own, then you're not meant to pass," Shikamaru shrugged. Judging by the shape Sasuke's hand made, he had the seal on a scroll in his vest pocket. Perfect. He would have to hold it out… "Who would have thought it would be this easy to catch you g-"

The pulsive wave of gravity shot from Sasuke's puppeteered, outstretched hand, Shikamaru's body being thrown back for meters upon meters, until he was far enough away that his shadow snapped off of them, and Sasuke found joy in slamming him against the large trunk of a tree. He made sure to open his eyes to preserve the memory. Apparently Shikamaru had not read up enough on the Rinnegan. It was his oversight to make.

"Use a Rasengan on the chest," Sasuke instructed, racing forward and knowing Naruto would only be a hair behind him. "Make all of the scrolls fly up in the air."

"You got it!" Naruto's ball of energy collided with the metal before he tossed the chest up in the air. One hundred scrolls scattered in every upward direction, tossing and turning around. With Sasuke's eyes, he could see every last one, flitting from one to the next, reading an abundance of *Fake, Fake, Fake*, before he found the odd one out. Shikamaru gave them a good hint, telling them that the scroll had to be in the chest.

Just to flex this power that Shikamaru overlooked, Sasuke pulled the gravity in his direction, the scrolls all zooming at him. He grabbed the one he needed, the one with the kanji for '*Fire'* displayed on the front. With the scroll in hand, neither he nor Naruto thought to stick around. They were gone quickly, with Naruto tossing back a gleeful, "See 'ya later, Shikamaru!" to the jonin rubbing at the back of his bruised head.

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The other four jonin did put up valiant battles. Predictably, each scroll element had its respective nation guarding it. The kunoichi from Kumo was a particularly difficult victory, with Naruto ending up in his combined Kyuubi Sage form. And thankfully, the Susanoo was able to pierce through the Iwa shinobi's defense; they had thought for a moment they might need to bring out their new jutsu to bust through it, something Sasuke desperately did not want to do considering how easily the information would leak. He didn't want to lose the clutch of surprise because of this dumb test.

They made it to the center of the forest by midnight, having completed their portion of the test in under 12 hours. It had to have been faster than the test makers anticipated. At least it was to Iruka, who was the one to greet them at the climax of their victory, just like last time.

Iruka congratulated them, then instructed them to open the golden scroll to find the kanji for ‘teamwork’ boldly written on it. He started a monologue about the importance of teams and the greater sense of allies. Sasuke was starting to get sick of the entire concept from pure overexposure alone. Neither he nor Naruto needed the lecture, so Sasuke tuned it out. After all, it was ridiculous to insist so heavily on teamwork when the next section of the exam would be one-on-one battles where they’re expected to bring their opponent to near death.

He was brought back to the conversation at the end when Naruto gleefully invited their old teacher to go get ramen. Snapping his head back to the pair of them, Sasuke berated, “It’s *midnight*, Naruto. Ichiraku’s isn’t open.”

So they had cup ramen instead, of course, because there was nothing else to eat in Naruto’s fridge after having been gone for five days. Iruka had declined the offer to join them, thankfully, which meant Sasuke was finally able to sleep.

The mattress offered him respite as it always did, finally rid of the idiocy that was the Chunin exams.

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Waking up the next morning was like running through quicksand, but they couldn't sleep the day away like Naruto tried to convince him they could. At 12:30, Naruto had to meet with all of the other test-passers in the training hall. Sasuke had to drag his undead body the entire way.

They made it with barely a minute to spare to find Kakashi outside of the building waiting for them. "Cutting it close, aren't you guys?" he nagged at them in greeting, which sounded so ridiculous coming from him. "I've been told you passed your second exam much quicker than we had thought you would."

Naruto chuckled smugly, arms crossed behind his head. "You should know by now to not underestimate us!"

"On the contrary, I must have overestimated our jonin," Kakashi excused. Then, he turned to Naruto. "Naruto, would you give me a minute to talk to Sasuke alone? Go ahead and head in. The proctor is probably starting already. Don't miss it."

"Huh?" he tilted his head. "Okay," he sounded subdued in his confusion, but started walking into the building regardless. "I'll see you inside, Sasuke! Maybe I'll get to kick your ass today, huh?" he called, and Sasuke was suddenly hit with the realization that Naruto…

Naruto *didn't know* Sasuke wouldn't be participating in the rest of the exam.

He had thought it had been obvious, ever since that conversation with the Elders, that he was only in this damn thing to get Naruto through the required first two tests. They hadn't talked about the third exam at all, which Sasuke had taken to mean that Naruto was aware that Sasuke would drop out for it. But the more Sasuke thought about it now, Naruto was Naruto, as he always was, and was probably too caught up with the theatrics of it all. "I was expecting to meet Naruto here alone," Kakashi admitted.

Kakashi at least wasn't so deluded. "I was just dropping him off," Sasuke explained. Truthfully, he wanted to watch Naruto fight to make sure he made it into the final rounds. Surely there would be enough shinobi to have made it through this time that would warrant preliminaries, just like their last exams.

"Ah," he nodded, leaning back against the wall of the building. "It appears he does not know that you aren't planning on taking the third test, I presume?"

Scoffing, Sasuke placed his hand on his hip. "I didn't think I had to tell him." Kakashi raised an eyebrow at him, and Sasuke read it perfectly. It was a glaring oversight on Sasuke's part to think he wouldn't have to spell it out for Naruto, and Sasuke should have known him better than that. He couldn't deny it. Perhaps he had gotten too comfortable with how well Naruto usually read him. "Whatever."

With a great sigh, Kakashi dropped his shoulders. He sounded exhausted, but he trudged through it anyway, “This is where I come in, then.” This was a perplexing thing to say, so Sasuke listened raptly. “I would like to formally request that you *do* participate in the third exam.”

That was certainly not what Sasuke had been expecting. Kakashi had to know how unlikely that would be. “Why would I do that?”

“As a favor to me?” Kakashi tried, and Sasuke glared at him for the real reason. “Okay, okay. So it turns out the news of you and Naruto being in the Chunin exams spread a bit farther than anyone anticipated. It seems that certain journalists went into detail about what our Chunin exams usually entail, which includes the final battles of the third task. Because of this, we are currently expecting record breaking crowds to attend them. Even officials from Iron put in requests to be hosted, and then the Feudal Lords all said they were excited to come watch...”

Eyebrow twitching, Sasuke cut through the fat. “Everyone wants to watch me and Naruto fight each other.”

Kakashi laughed nervously. “It seems so!” he was rubbing the back of his head, aware that he was completely at Sasuke’s mercy. “With people coming from just about every country, you can see why there might be some a tad bit disappointed if they travelled so far only to find out the main entertainment was cancelled…”

Scoffing to himself, Sasuke rolled his eyes. He couldn’t help the bitter taste in his mouth. Why would people be so interested in watching them fight, anyway? What benefit could it be to them? Did they want to see them hurt each other so badly? Sparring with Naruto was one thing; it was training, and personally there was still a part of Sasuke that had a desire to prove himself against his old rival. What did complete strangers think they could get out of watching them? Battling Naruto was something for just the pair of them, no one else. “What would I care about disappointing complete strangers?”

“Ah, right. You wouldn’t,” Kakashi rubbed at the back of his head. “Well, that’s that, then. If you don’t care about disappointing thousands of people.” He turned away, and Sasuke raised his eyebrow at such a feeble guilt trip. Sasuke *didn’t* care about disappointing thousands of people. Ridiculous. With another great sigh, Kakashi pondered aloud to himself, as if forgetting Sasuke was there, “Though I suppose Naruto would probably be the most disappointed.”

He had his back fully turned on Sasuke, which was a good thing, because that last sentence had pierced right through him. He hadn’t put any prior thought to it, having assumed Naruto was aware that Sasuke’s participance in the Chunin exams only extended to the first two tests. Of course Naruto *wasn’t* aware, so caught up in the grandeur, fully immersed with enjoying the challenge and getting to show off. Would Naruto be disappointed if he didn’t get to fight Sasuke in the last round? It would be so completely unnecessary; he and Naruto sparred all of the time- once a week nowadays. What would be so special about it that he would be *disappointed* in not being able to do it in front of other people? Did Naruto like showing off *that* much?

…He did.

Nonplussed, Sasuke's spiral came to a head at the realization that Naruto *would* be disappointed that Sasuke dropped out of the exams right before they had the chance to battle each other in front of an audience. He would probably beg Sasuke to continue, blue eyes wide and that full, pink, pouting bottom lip on full display-

With the realization came anger. Kakashi's words, so flippantly said, had not been so flippantly planned. *This* was the guilt trip he was playing, as if Naruto was some catch-all to Sasuke's cooperation under his puppeteering. He probably thought that he had Sasuke in his web with that airy musing. What bullshit. "It's none of Naruto's business what I choose to do," he spat loudly, making his disapproval in Kakashi's tactic as clear as possible.

When Kakashi turned around, he lost that playfully contemplative act. "I never said it was."

No, he hadn't. But he had been attempting to use Naruto as some type of controlling device. Treating Naruto like a tool to manipulate Sasuke's emotions. His anger began to overflow, drowning him in its ire and making it impossible to differentiate what specifically about that was so despicable. That he thought Sasuke could be manipulated? That he was using Naruto's emotions as a weapon? "Kakashi," he stepped closer to his old teacher, and it wasn't until he was right in his face that he became aware his Sharingan had activated at some point. It was his defense, his weapon, and his burden all at once; in that moment, it was a subconscious extension of his power. "Don't try to use Naruto as a way to control me again."

In the flickering of emotion across Kakashi's face, Sasuke could see a fear laden into layers. Was he remembering just how powerful Sasuke was, now that he had this Rinnegan? These months of Sasuke strolling through the gates of his village had subdued that fear, a dangerous thing for Kakashi to forget. Perhaps he had assumed Naruto was some sort of shield from it. Thankfully, one of the fears Sasuke could sense was that of regret for having tried this particular antic. He would not need to instill any more warnings; Kakashi was not stupid, and Sasuke had successfully ripped away any delusion that pulling another similar stunt would go by without physical retribution.

Conversation finished, Sasuke stormed off into the building. He would find Naruto and tell him personally that he wouldn't be attending the rest of the exam, and however Naruto would react would be for no one but Naruto to deal with.

He found the familiar blond spikes almost immediately, the orange outfit always glaringly vibrant in a crowd. A battle had already commenced on the bottom floor, plenty of blood staining the ground despite probably being the first pair of the preliminaries. Naruto was enthralled with watching them, but he did notice Sasuke step up to him. "You're lucky your name wasn't called first this time! Leave it to Kakashi-sensei to make everyone he interacts with late."

No, the real reason they were late was because Naruto refused to stop smothering him with his bodyweight for too long that morning. Was it that memory that had Sasuke's heart pumping in his throat, or had that been there since the conversation with Kakashi? He swallowed it down. "Naruto," he clenched his jaw, trying to not be affected by the way

Naruto blinked back at him, finally peeling his eyes away from the two genin breaking each other's bones down below them. "I'm not taking the third exam."

Naruto was supposed to whine, to turn fully to Sasuke and complain, to pout and beg like Sasuke had anticipated. He was not supposed to close his lips so delicately, nor was he supposed to sigh as though it was merely nothing more than a breath. "I thought so." Had he? With this, Sasuke was perplexed into a stupor. "You said that you don't want to hurt any of the genin."

Sasuke did not remember saying that at all. He had said, on that first night in the forest, that he didn't want to *fight* any of the genin. But- was that not what he had meant? No, Sasuke did not want to use any of his power against children who had no hand in the way this world had hurt him. He averted his eyes down to the battle, where the two shinobi were coming to a climax in their fight. Missing teeth scattered the floor, and Sasuke remembered the last time he had been in this section of the exam. How he had rendered his opponent, that henchmen of Orochimaru's, unconscious with the Lion's Barrage. A henchmen of Orochimaru's perhaps deserved it, but Sasuke had not known that at the time, nor would it have made any difference. Sasuke still would have incapacitated every opponent he had to in his thirst to prove his power.

He didn't enjoy reflecting on that. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched for Naruto's reaction. "Are you disappointed?" he had to ask.

"Of course I am," Naruto all but scoffed, and Sasuke knew that he did not mean he was disappointed with Sasuke refusing to beat up children. "I was really looking forward to finally having that real match with you!" Ridiculous. Sasuke shook his head, but for some reason his lips felt tight with the urge to not smile. "But I kind of… don't really want to fight any of these guys, either." Sasuke cocked his head at him, eyebrows furrowed as he tried to figure him out. "I mean, it wouldn't be much of a battle, you know? I wouldn't be able to go all-out on them. It'd be unfair. And I don't want to actually hurt them, either."

Sasuke leaned his hip against the railing, his body fully facing Naruto as he did it. Carefully, Sasuke asked him, "Are you going to drop out too?"

At this, Naruto looked uneasy, a frown on his lips. "I don't think I can. I mean, I can't really become a chunin if I don't take the third exam, can I?"

Well, that wasn't quite true. Sasuke had no doubt that whatever happened from here on out, Naruto was going to be made a chunin. He was also certain that he'd get a jonin recommendation and appointment within the week, if not by the end of the day. But it would probably be less fair to have Naruto pass the Chunin exams without needing to participate in the final exam than it would be to have him battle the genin all-out. Naruto would feel guilty about it. Naruto would feel guilty in every scenario: if he made chunin without battling the genin, if he disrespected the genin by battling them with anything less than his full potential, if he hurt them by giving them said full potential. There was only one scenario in which he would not feel guilty.

If he made chunin by battling Sasuke.

Across the hall, Sasuke could see that they were being watched. By Kakashi. He didn't seem perturbed by Sasuke's eye contact, though there was caution there. Cursing to himself, he closed his eyes, sighing deeply. He didn't owe Naruto anything. Naruto's disappointment was not a factor, not really. But it was true that it wouldn't be fair to whichever unlucky souls had the misfortune of being paired to battle the Great Shinobi Hero, costing them their chance at chunin.

Fuck it all. "Come with me," Sasuke ordered, unconcerned with the confusion Naruto displayed at him as he began to walk away. He made a beeline for the Hokage, skirting around the upper level of the room and ignoring anyone turning to watch them pass. Kakashi watched them the entire way, until Sasuke was in front of him again. "Fine," he all but spat, falling back into the anger he had felt outside. "We'll do it."

"Ah- huh?" Kakashi stuttered.

He wasn't the only one. Naruto was staring at Sasuke in utter bewilderment, "…Uh, what are we doing, exactly?"

"We'll battle in the final matches," Sasuke explained, not taking his eyes off of Kakashi, not even to blink. "But *only* in a match against each other. It wouldn't be fair for anyone else to be unlucky enough to draw our names in the preliminaries."

Kakashi was stunned into silence. Behind him, Naruto was wrapping his head around it all. "Wait… can we do that…?"

They absolutely could, if they demanded it. Eventually, Kakashi came to, his astonished voice quiet. "After all of that, you agreed anyway." Sasuke's Mangekyou activated with the lowering of his brows. The sudden violent look had snapped Kakashi out of his shock. "Right. I suppose that would actually probably be the best course of action." Nodding at them, Kakashi squared his shoulders to face them. "You two do not need to be entered in the tournament style of the exam. We'll use the sole battle between you guys as Naruto's chunin aptitude, to take place after the climax of the other battles."

Dumbfounded, Naruto dropped his jaw, repeating, "*We can do that*!?"

For a moment, Kakashi took his eyes off of Sasuke's to address him. "Well, I don't see why not." It wasn't long lived, because his next words fell on Sasuke, "If you want to, that is."

It only pissed him off more. No, Sasuke did not want to. But it was the right thing to do, the situation in mind. And it didn't have anything to do with keeping Naruto from being disappointed. At least- it was not the reason why Sasuke was agreeing to it. He didn't like the exams. He didn't like fighting for sport or spectacle. If it kept Naruto out of the guilt of fighting the genin, then that was just a benefit, and nothing more.

Whatever.

Turning on his heel, Sasuke bid them, "If we're doing that, then I have no business here."

“O-Oh, you don’t want to stay to… watch?” Naruto trailed off, and Sasuke caught the way his gaze travelled down to Konohamaru. Of course, Naruto was concerned with seeing his friend pass the preliminaries. Sasuke would not get in his way.

If Naruto wasn’t fighting here today, then Sasuke did not need to stay. He had been in Konoha long enough, thanks to that damn forest. And he was not going to be the one to request Naruto follow him when he was worried about his friend. “No.” They locked eyes, and Sasuke nodded once at him. “See you,” he said. ‘*Friday*,’ he didn’t.

Naruto caught the unspoken meaning and nodded back.

As Sasuke was at the door, Kakashi caught up to him. “Sasuke,” he said determinedly. Sasuke had half of a mind to bring his Sharingan back out for good measure, but he gave him the benefit of the doubt and held back. “I’m sorry.” Another honest apology from Kakashi. Was Sasuke the only person to have been granted such an honor twice?

Though it felt sincere, Sasuke wasn’t in the mood for it. “Is that all?”

“I guess it is.”

Sasuke left.

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The final matches weren’t for another month. It was almost October, nearing a year since the end of the war. The days were still hot, though a much more bearable heat to deal with under his cloak. He had visited Naruto every week, who seemed only more and more excited about their upcoming public match. They still sparred on those Friday nights, but Sasuke could tell he was holding back; he kept sneering that he was working on some new moves to surprise him with. Despite how little he wanted to be seen as a spectacle amongst the people, Sasuke couldn’t help the way the taunts were getting under his skin. Leave it to Naruto to get him to actually look forward to the match. It was almost absurd how a promise to hand him his ass got Sasuke’s heart pumping enough for him to mirror the sentiment.

Everything was becoming a competition between them, now, and somehow it was riveting. Who could brush their teeth the fastest, finish their meal first- even their kisses, now a regular occurrence every night they shared Naruto’s bed, had become something of a contest. The moment would escalate quickly, and then they would both be panting too hard to pass out right away. Sasuke couldn’t tell who won those, regardless of who made the other come first, all except for-

Well, it *started out* on even footing. It was one week before the exam, and Naruto had gotten even more ridiculous than the previous weeks. They had been in the training field to start the night, heated by the thrill of seeing who could do more push-ups. It was such a stupid contest, but Sasuke could not for the life of him let Naruto win. Not when he was being so damn idiotic all month. It was infuriating, but Sasuke simply *had* to knock him down a peg, and he *would not* lose, even if his arm had turned numb twenty minutes ago.

The contest proved futile. It seemed that more and more of them did, nowadays. They were on too even a footing, both just as mad with determination to win. They both kept going for hours, and it was so damn pointless. Sasuke got fed up with it and demanded that it was a draw, but Naruto, such a sore winner, gloated that Sasuke was only saying that because he lost. He was so fucking annoying, Sasuke couldn't help thinking over and over as the race back to the apartment had become *another* contest. It resulted in another tie, of course, which Naruto couldn't help whining about. So plagued by Naruto's maddening taunts, Sasuke slammed him up against the patio door as soon as they shut it.

Making out was not supposed to be painful, but there was something so satisfying about the way they bruised each other's lips that made them both crazy. It was fine, anyway, because Naruto would heal them both afterwards. They were both too frustrated for the softness they typically had with each other. Not with the third exam coming up.

Sasuke had been *so* sure he was going to win, tonight. He made the first move, pinning Naruto against the door. Had taken Naruto in his hand, rough, but *good*, so good. Naruto had been moaning and babbling in that way he did when he was past a certain level of turned on. Growling, practically, with more stupid threats and declarations, even though Sasuke had him in a near puddle.

The familiar popping sound startled him, but not as much as two pairs of hands suddenly pulling him away from his near victory. The shock of it made it more difficult than it should have been to make sense of it, but Naruto had had his hands behind Sasuke's neck, perfectly hidden from view. "Oi!" Sasuke shouted, and then with the sharp jab of his elbow, smashed one of the Shadow Clones in the face hard enough for it to disappear. The second one was dealt with in similar fashion. "Don't use Shadow Clones!" he scolded, mortified.

But the original Naruto was already on him, the clones nothing more than a distraction to get him closer to the bed. He was sniggering darkly, "I didn't realize they were against the rules." Idiot. There was no fucking rulebook for what they were doing, Sasuke had to admit, but still- to bring out his *Shadow Clones* when they were making out? He was a- damn pervert. A damn pervert who now had Sasuke hovering over the bed, leaning over him, trying to get him to fall.

He wouldn't let it happen. Dodging the mouth that was making a beeline for his neck (Sasuke could *not* let him get at his neck), Sasuke caught him at their ankles. He swiftly undid Naruto's footing, twisting their bodies to get him to be the one to fall against the mattress. No sooner had Naruto landed did Sasuke have his hand once again in position, slipping easily down into the already undone pants. Surely, with this, Sasuke would win. Naruto was already close, and he had yet to get at Sasuke with much of anything.

Or so he had thought. He had thought he had Naruto's unpredictability under control. Stupid of him to think he'd ever truly be able to contain such a thing.

Likewise, he should not have underestimated the hands that had travelled low down his back, under his clothes. They had grabbed his ass before, so Sasuke was prepared for how they would feel massaging the flesh. Foolishly, Sasuke hadn't thought that that pleasure could be anything compared to what he had been doing with his own hand. How wrong he was.

Just a finger down the crevice was enough to have Sasuke freeze. It was new. It was thrilling, confusing, wonderful. It should have been weird. A fingertip was all it was. A damn *fingertip*. Thinking back on it, it was enraging, how Naruto pulled the rug out from under his feet with just a damn fingertip. Pressing at his entrance, and it should have been gross, Sasuke couldn't understand how it wasn't gross, but it wasn't. Hands needing into the muscles of his backside, and the fingertip trailing this new, exciting motion, and then Naruto had captured his neck.

And it was over.

The competition of it completely disappeared after that, been wiped clean from Sasuke's mind. All he could do was tremble under Naruto's finger, which had breeched him for bare moments that felt like lifetimes in the haze. Naruto had flipped him onto his back and returned with the lotion before Sasuke had even noticed he had gone. Shedding Sasuke's pants off, Naruto spread him wide with the gentlest of touches, such a stark contrast to the bruises they had been inflicting on one another just minutes before.

The finger worked at him, slick with lotion, finding a spot within him that felt like the source of all of Sasuke's chakra. Fire and electric. Who knew such a spot would be there? Certainly not Sasuke. Naruto's lips against his neck, Naruto's hair against his nose, Naruto's fingers deep inside him, Naruto's other hand around his cock, Naruto's chakra burning all around. Sasuke could feel him everywhere, in every facet of his being.

Yeah, Naruto had won that time.

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The mere memory of those fingers brought heat to Sasuke's face, so he tried not to think of it, but he knew it would creep up on him the next time they were together like that. He had enough trouble keeping himself together the following morning. Naruto kept grinning at him and Sasuke was unable to stop blushing, to the point where he ran out much earlier than he had been of late. Sasuke wasn't sure how he would face Naruto again without falling victim to the memory, which had been preserved to perfection by his Sharingan. The next time they would see each other would be at their match.

Desperate to rid his mind of it, Sasuke chose to loop back to the hideout he knew Karin and the others would still be in. He had a jump drive to return and questions to ask, and being back in one of Orochimaru's labs was sure to eradicate such a memory from him. Or at least bury it into the darkest chasms of his mind.

He didn't want to go inside, not with the questions he had for her. He definitely did not feel like repeating what happened the last time, with Orochimaru popping up in the middle of their conversation. He knew she'd be able to sense his presence from the distance he chose, bunkering away in a tree some fifty meters from the entrance of the hideout.

She greeted him with her hands on her hips. "Just a warning: he's here." Of course he was. Why would he be anywhere else?

“Let’s make this quick, then.” He held his hand out for her to take the small drive, which she did discreetly, depositing it into her hip pack. Concerned with Orochimaru having chosen to reside in the lab nearest Konoha so close to the conclusion of the Chunin exams, Sasuke narrowed his eyes. “What do you know?”

She furrowed her eyebrows at him. “About what?”

Perhaps she was actually unaware. She would have told him everything she knew in a heartbeat if otherwise. But even though he knew she had become one of Orochimaru’s favorites recently, it would make sense for him to keep her in the dark about certain things. Especially something he would want to keep secret from Sasuke. Still, she could be of some use. “I have reason to suspect that he’s planning something regarding the Chunin exams.”

By the way she pursed her lips, Sasuke could tell that she was connecting certain dots together. “I wouldn’t put it past him. He has been vocal about being excited to watch your match. Now that I think about it, a bit too vocal.” Sasuke narrowed his eyes. No, Orochimaru never said things for the sake of speaking. If he was slewing his brand of foreshadowing, then he was definitely up to no good. “I know that he’s going to watch it in person-” Sasuke’s lungs filled with air- “but I don’t see how he could do anything with that ANBU glued to him.”

“He’s coming to the exams?”

“Yes, he got it cleared to be in attendance by the village.” Anger flashing, Sasuke clenched his teeth tightly together. What was Kakashi thinking, letting Orochimaru just stroll into Konoha during the Chunin exams like that? Did *no one* remember what happened the last time he attended the exams? They ended up with a dead Hokage and a half-destroyed village. “But it wouldn’t make sense for him to try anything with all of the security they’re going to have. And he doesn’t really have a specific goal at the moment. All that he’s been focused on since you showed up last time is wanting to watch you and Naruto. I think he just genuinely wants to see how you two fight. He’s been bored. And he’s interested in seeing what happens when you guys fuse your chakra.”

That didn’t make him feel any better. If he was gunning for their new jutsu, it would not make sense to watch them fight. It wasn’t like they would be able to use it on each other. Perhaps he could gather intellect on their bond like that, but it would make more sense for him to stage a battle between them and him in a way that they’d be forced to display it. But how would he be able to do that when he was so guarded? ANBU itself was probably no match for him, but the other Kages would all be in attendance.

“Listen, we’re leaving for Konoha in a few hours. You should get a decent head start and talk it over with the Hokage.” Yes, he *would* talk it over with the Hokage.

He arrived in the village early Friday morning. He could have arrived the night before, slept in Naruto’s bed, but he could not afford the distraction. Heat came up to his cheeks just looking at the gates of the village from a distance. No, he couldn’t let himself get distracted with the threat of Orochimaru. This was more than just a match, now.

The first rounds of the last exam would start in a few hours, and the crowds in the streets were already at an obscene number. He travelled by rooftop to the Hokage's office, perching upside-down from the top awning outside of the windows, peering inside.

It was full of Kages, other village leaders, and their closest bodyguards. There were even all five of the Feudal Lords. Sasuke paid no attention to any of the others, despite how packed the office was. He glared at Kakashi's upside-down face until the Hokage could feel it enough to find him, ignoring the way all of the other eyes in the room went to him. He waited for Kakashi to open the window.

Before Kakashi could greet him in that airy tone, Sasuke demanded rhetorically the moment the glass barrier opened, not caring about the high-ranking officials from around the world gawking at him, "Are you an idiot?"

"-Uh. Maybe we should talk outside-"

"Why are you letting Orochimaru watch the exams?" Sasuke insisted on asking. He didn't miss the ripple of unease that flitted throughout the room at the name. Despite it, everyone else went dead silent.

Fake smile plastered on his masked face, Kakashi placed his hand on Sasuke's upside down shoulder, patting lightly to disguise the fact that he was trying to shove him out of the way. "Right. Let's discuss this outside!" Scoffing, Sasuke dropped from the ceiling and walked ahead out of Kakashi's reach. He didn't like Kakashi physically corralling him, both of them only liking physical contact with people they loved, and all. It was evident Kakashi did not want to have the conversation in front of all of the other worldly officials.

Stupid. What made any of those people in that room so special? Come to think of it, it would have been a convenient moment for Sasuke to have stumbled upon a year ago, all of those world leaders packed into a single confined room. Perhaps that was why Kakashi was so quick to get Sasuke out of there.

They only went as far as the roof, though. Kakashi took a moment to sigh. "Aright. Go ahead."

Narrowing his eyes did nothing to tell Sasuke what Kakashi had meant by that. "What?"

"You're angry that I approved Orochimaru being here. So go on and yell at me."

Is that what he wanted? Clicking his tongue, Sasuke let himself stew. If he was going to burst, he would let it happen, but for the time being he kept himself decent. "I want to hear *why* you would do something so stupid, first."

Kakashi struggled with it for a moment, and Sasuke watched every minute reaction in his expression. He seemed tired, more than anything. "It wasn't just my decision. Orochimaru has not shown any ill-will to the village since the end of the war, or any of the villages for that matter. The Elders thought it would be a good test-"

"Kakashi."

Sasuke's eyes went sideways as two presences joined them on the roof. The Elders in question had arrived.

Hands going into his pockets, Kakashi leaned back, addressing them. "I was just explaining to Sasuke how we plan on testing Orochimaru's character by letting him watch the matches today."

"Were you?" Homura commented lightly, strolling across the rooftop over to them. "He does seem to be concerned about the situation."

Yes, he was concerned about the situation. It was the correct reaction to have about the situation. "You already know Orochimaru's character," Sasuke reminded them.

"We don't quite know his current one," Koharu corrected, coming to a stop a few meters distance from Sasuke. "According to reports, he has been on great behavior this past year. He made a request to be able to watch the match between you and Naruto. Our sources have no reason to believe he is attempting anything. It seemed to be an innocent request-"

"Nothing about him requesting to watch me and Naruto is innocent," Sasuke snapped at her. He turned back to Kakashi, urgently spitting, "I warned you that he was planning something to do with Naruto at the exams. He tried to get him alone on his way back from Suna."

Trying to ease the tension, Kakashi gave him a level look. "And I took that warning seriously. We've increased security on him. One of the reasons why I allowed him to come to the village today was because of the amount of security we have at the moment. We currently have largest majority of ANBU we've ever had inside the village gates, and that's not to mention the help we have from the other villages' travelling security. On top of that, all five Kages are present- as are both living jinchuurikis."

Sasuke considered this, but any way he thought about it, he still did not trust Orochimaru. The alliance between all of these countries were still too new to rule out that he wasn't working with one or more of them for an attack. And even if all he was planning was to watch, should the village have let him have his way? If he wanted to observe Naruto, the jinchuuriki of the Kyuubi, obviously there was nothing innocent about that. Not the man whose research knew no bounds.

"And that's not to mention our biggest security we have against him." Sasuke met Kakashi's eye. "You."

Searching Kakashi's expression, Sasuke tried to make sense of this.

"You did kill him last time."

Right. He did.

But it still didn't sit correctly with him. "It's too dangerous to give him what he wants. He was sick when I killed him. He's in perfect health now. If he's planning something with Naruto-"

“We consider Naruto’s safety as one of our top priorities-” Homura started to say.

“You consider the *Kyuubi* as one of your top priorities,” Sasuke correctly loudly. He did not want to be lied to in such a way. The details mattered. “I can’t tell what specifically he’s after, just that it somehow involves Naruto. None of you know Orochimaru like I do. We’re all playing right into his hands.”

“Are you going to pull out of the fight?” Kakashi asked him.

Sasuke took a moment with this. Honestly, he hadn’t considered that an option, but that was only because he had been too angry think of his options. This late in the game, Naruto would surely be disappointed. But if it was between a disappointed Naruto and an endangered one, he’d take the disappointment. “If I need to, I will.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, Kakashi nodded at him. “Well then, I guess that’s how it’s going to work. We’ll tell Orochimaru that he’s not allowed in the stadium.”

“Kakashi,” both Elders began to protest, but Kakashi raised an eyebrow at them.

“Did you want to go tell our Feudal Lords there wouldn’t be a Naruto versus Sasuke match?” he offered them, and they both shut up, though they did not look pleased about it. “But Sasuke, I do need you to know-” Sasuke grinded his teeth, wishing for once that he wouldn’t be given another damn stipulation, “these matches are being filmed publicly. Whatever you’re trying to conceal from Orochimaru would probably only last a few hours, at most.”

That was a strange stipulation, for sure. “What do you mean they’re being ‘filmed publicly’?”

“There were too many people who got denied access to the arena. We sold out of tickets almost instantly, and people had gotten quite angry with us,” he sounded almost annoyed underneath all of the exhaustion. “In order to avoid rioting, we had the idea to record the match so that we can show it after the news. It would kind of be like a movie, only a real event. People seem surprisingly excited to watch it.”

What an outlandish idea. Record a battle like a movie for people to watch on their televisions as entertainment. What was wrong with people? “I didn’t agree to be recorded,” Sasuke muttered.

“Unfortunately, I don’t think that’s something you can barter against at this point,” Kakashi shrugged. The cameras didn’t really matter, anyway. Regardless of Orochimaru being in the stands or not, he had plenty of eyes who were bound to give him every detail.

To be honest, it didn’t even matter if Orochimaru was in the stands or not anymore. It was already too late. It was too big of an event, now. “Whatever,” he contended bitterly. “It doesn’t make a difference if Orochimaru is in the arena. You’ve already let him into the village, which means he’s already in position to do whatever the hell he wants. You might as well let him stay, for all I care. It’s *your* village.” At Kakashi’s raised eyebrow, Sasuke doubled down, “But if he tries something, I don’t want to hear a damn apology from any of you for not listening to me. I want you to take my warnings seriously.”

“That, we most definitely will,” Kakashi promised. He was about to leave, too angry for any further conversation, when Kakashi stopped him, another damn hand on his shoulder. Sasuke glared at it, and then its owner. “Wait, Sasuke,” thankfully at Sasuke’s halt, Kakashi dropped the contact. “Do you mind doing something for me?” At the moment, yes, he did mind. But then Kakashi gave him a soft request, “I have some designs I want you to look over today. You’re not planning on watching the other matches, are you?” Sasuke shook his head. “Great. Let me get you the folder. I’ve been putting some specifics on the design plans of the memorial that need your approval. Please consider them, and I want you to put anything else you would possibly want there, too. Just give them back to me before your match today, okay?”

The museum. Perhaps that was the only thing that would dull Sasuke’s anger at his old teacher. It could have been a guilt trip, because Sasuke sure did feel plenty of it when Kakashi handed him the thick manila folder bursting with documents and sketches. But Sasuke suspected that it wasn’t; it was very likely that he had been trying to get them to Sasuke for a while, but with the Chunin exams, hadn’t wanted to distract him with it. It wasn’t ideal timing now, either. Actually, perhaps it was exactly what Sasuke needed.

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19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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He decided to show up a half hour before his match. He supposed it would be better to meet Naruto beforehand, all… *things* considered. And because it would be nice to get at least a portion of the taunts he was bound to throw at him in private before the audience and apparent cameras were focused on them. The completed documents in his hand also needed to be returned to the Hokage.

There wasn't much Sasuke needed to change or add. He only really had one note: he wanted the temple to be rebuilt perfectly, and for it to not turn into a tourist attraction, but something more subdued where he would be able to visit on his own time if he wanted. He didn't mind if people visited it respectfully, but he didn't want it included in any type of tour.

The rebuilt arena was almost three times as big as the last one. Even with all of the expanded space, the crowds were twice as packed in, with people nearly sitting in each other's laps. Sasuke took a moment to frown at them all, so joyously enthralled by the two children pummeling each other to near death in the center of the field. Avoiding any further thought on the subject, Sasuke found the luxury box seating where Kakashi was sure to be with all of the other Kage and Feudal Lords.

He was stopped by two ANBU and no less than six other masked shinobi from other countries on his way. Clicking his tongue, Sasuke called loudly to Kakashi for his attention, who rose from his seat at once and put the guards at ease. "Ah, was everything okay?" Kakashi inquired, not completely devoid of nerves.

"Just about," Sasuke huffed, the complexities of his relationship with Kakashi too exhausting to deal with.

"Thanks for looking over them," Kakashi breathed, and there was something about it Sasuke couldn't place. Regret, maybe? For what? "Look, Sasuke-" his suspicion only continued to rise, "I want you to know that I'm doing everything I can to make this happen."

A bizarre thing to lament on in the moment. It wasn't lost on Sasuke. Was he having more trouble than he thought getting it to pass? Did he really think it was going to be so easy? "Yeah. Thanks."

"And I mean everything," Kakashi repeated. Sasuke nodded warily at him. Kakashi eyed the battle down below for a moment, before deciding on adding, "Fight smart, Sasuke."

Right. Smart. He left Sasuke with it, rejoining the plethora of Kages and Lords, most of whom were giving Sasuke annoyingly pointed looks. Sasuke found it rich that they all so intrigued by his upcoming match, despite clearly despising him. Of course Gaara was of the

ones glaring at him the hardest, which he couldn't care less about. He had no authority in Konoha. Sasuke hoped he was remembering their last Chunin exams, when Gaara had been the unwelcome one after his village laid siege on them. He hoped he was remembering how Sasuke had made him bleed, and how Naruto had been on Sasuke's side, battling against him. Let those cold eyes glare, Sasuke thought.

Fight smart. Even with Gaara to distract him, Kakashi's last words rang. Fight smart against Naruto? Sure, battling Naruto always required tremendous skill, but smarts? Sasuke always fought smart. He had fought Naruto more than anyone else; he knew how they worked together. He didn't need to fight smart in the sense that he already *knew* how the battle would play out, thanks to the bond. Besides which, shouldn't Kakashi be rooting for Naruto to win, to illuminate more insurance on making him chunin?

Before Sasuke could focus too much on it, a voice was calling his name. "Sasuke!" Sakura was squeezing her way through the aisle. He wished she wouldn't shout his name in this crowd; the people around them all reacted to it, somehow no one able to decide whether they were excited that he was so close to them or terrified. "I'm so glad I was able to catch you alone! Can I talk to you for a second?" Sasuke still had time to spare, so he nodded at her. "Great! Um. Come here."

She grabbed at his sleeve, dragging him further up in the stands until they were in the corner at the top. It was the most privacy they could hope to have in such a crowd.

"So, Naruto's birthday is coming up soon," she began, throwing him for a complete loop. She wanted to talk to him about Naruto's birthday? The whiplash from conversations was too much to process. "It's the following week, on the tenth." Right, the tenth of October. One year since the end of the war, the anniversary of the date they almost killed each other. "I was talking to him about it, and he kind of said… well, he's never had a proper celebration on his birthday, before. What with his childhood, and being out of the village, and then last year, and all."

Last year when the fate of the world was in jeopardy was one thing, but his childhood being ostracized from the entire village was a whole other. He was still trying to process the arbitrary conversation, so he remained silent and let her continue.

"So I was thinking we should all throw him a real party! Well, I say that, but we've already all decided that we're gunna do it as a surprise for him. All of the old gang from our graduating year, and Lee and Ten Ten, of course. Everyone, really! Even Gaara, Temari, and Kankuro said they'd make time to come, as busy as they are." That was certainly a shock to hear, that Gaara was going to stop being Kazekage for a night for a party- and that Temari would let him. But it was for Naruto, after all. "All of the people Naruto cares about, and who care about him in return. We're going to finally give him a birthday he can remember back on and enjoy. One that he really deserves."

One that didn't involve getting his arm disintegrated or his parents dying and having a giant fox monster sealed away in his stomach, determining his fate as a despised figure. One with friends, people he cared about and who cared about him in return. Friends from all over, all of those people he had touched with his exuberant, warm soul. They would all be there to celebrate him.

Her voice became softer, more careful. “The only problem is, even if we get everyone together, I don’t think it would matter. He wouldn’t be truly happy,” her voice shook slightly, “if you weren’t there.”

It wasn’t a guilt trip. Not an intentional one, at least. It was the truth. Sasuke found it difficult to swallow, his throat lined with something thick and syrupy. *Was* that true? Would there still be a part of Naruto sad, even with everyone else there, everyone else accounted for, if Sasuke wasn’t at his birthday? Sakura thought so. She had been closer to him than he had these past years to know, even if she didn’t have a bond to their extent.

“I don’t know if- if you can make it,” she said tactfully. “But it’ll be on his birthday- not this Monday, but the next. If you’re in the area, it’d be really great if you could come! But it’s a secret from him, so we gotta keep it quiet.”

It was nice of her to act like he wasn’t cornered, because that wasn’t what she had been trying to do to him. He was certain, now, that Naruto would be remorse to discover that everyone he cared about was at a birthday party for him- everyone except for Sasuke. Letting go, Sasuke breathed out, “I’ll come.”

Sakura blinked twice at him. “You- You will?”

“Yeah.” He could feel something prickly on the back of his neck starting to form. Sakura was too affected, for some reason- no. Not just for some reason. Because he had made a promise to visit the village at her request. With a specific date set, too. It was a first for her. Feeling like he owed her more, Sasuke added, “Thanks, Sakura.”

Judging by the way she clasped her hands in front of her, so close to her chest, Sasuke gathered that she had not expected the conversation to go this way. “Of course you’d be invited. Naruto will want you there.”

Humorlessly, Sasuke chuckled, “No one else will.”

“I would,” she murmured lowly, as though for no one but herself. After realizing she had said it out loud, she quickly raised her voice, “Of course people would!” It was feeble, and she seemed to know it was pointless to try to venture down that deluded path and changed tones. “A-And besides, it doesn’t matter what anyone else wants; it’s for Naruto.”

“Thanks, Sakura,” he repeated, meaning something deeper this time.

Her face went as pink as her hair. “N-No problem! Well- you should probably go get ready for your match! Don’t tell Naruto, okay, but I’m- I’ll be rooting for you, okay?”

She’d be the only person in this entire arena on his side, then. A laugh escaped him. “I won’t, but only because it’d make him more annoying if I did.” It made her laugh too.

He left her, finding his way down beneath the stands to the waiting area for the competitors. Naruto was the only one in it; everyone else had already concluded their matches, with the last two still battling it out below them. Sasuke took a breath, glad Naruto hadn’t noticed him yet, and shook the lingering memories out of the forefront of his mind. It wasn’t the time for

them. He focused back to where Naruto was muttering to himself as he clutched onto the railing in front of him, "*Come on, come on, come on, Konohamaru*!"

For the first time, Sasuke took a second to recognize the two opponents who made it to the top of the leaderboard, currently battling for the highest position. It was, indeed, Konohamaru versus that Lightning-Style kunoichi Sasuke had lectured in the woods on the third day of their exam. An interesting pair, to say the least. Sasuke joined Naruto at the railing, leaning against it.

"No, no, no- come on! Use her own speed against her, come on!" Naruto was crying out, his whole body shaking with nerves.

Sasuke considered the battle. Konohamaru fought like Naruto used to, with nothing but boundless determination keeping him afloat. The Kumo kunoichi had incredible skill; Sasuke had been impressed with her during the second exam. He wouldn't have encouraged her to request a rematch with him if he hadn't. Riki was her name, he remembered. He could see the ball of energy Konohamaru had in his hand, juxtaposed with the lightning in her fingertips. Unable to stop himself from pointing out the coincidence, Sasuke smirked, "Rasengan versus Lightning Release, huh?"

Naruto hit the ceiling. Apparently, he had still been completely oblivious to Sasuke's arrival. "*Sasuke*!" The jump scare rattled him for only a second. "Geeze! Shush! Not right now!" He went back to clutching his railing, eyes glued to the fight below them. The nervous muttering from before must have been subconscious, because he went very quiet. Sasuke eyed the beads of sweat rolling down his face.

Of course his nerves today had nothing to do with his own battle. That, Naruto would be able to control. But he could do nothing but watch as the kid he mentored came so close to the glory of winning the Chunin exams' tournament style battles. Naruto had never gotten a chance at that glory, their last exams having been cut off right before, and not partaking in the tournament part for this one. He was living vicariously through Konohamaru. Konohamaru winning would be synonymous with Naruto having won, which would be a great parallel to make if it didn't mean he was putting too much of his mental wellbeing in something he had no control over.

In the end, Konohamaru did win, if only just barely. He had done what Naruto had been frantically pleading him to: used her speed against her. It was an interesting way to use the Rasengan, forming it only a moment before she came at him, unable to stop her remarkable speed from advancing directly into it. Would such a move work on Sasuke, with his eyes? Probably not, but Naruto had impeccable speed and timing, so it wouldn't be unthinkable.

Naruto was inconsolable, bouncing up and down in his euphoria. He had Sasuke by the shoulder, shaking him with every jump. If Naruto hadn't been so oblivious about it, Sasuke would think he was purposefully trying to make him nauseous before their match. Emotions flipping in an instant, he was suddenly crying down on the ground, his hand still clutching at Sasuke hard enough that Sasuke was forced to bend over with him.

An announcer was presenting Konohamaru as the winner, and Naruto was torn again between hysterics- cheering and crying. And then the announcer was letting everyone know that there

would be a brief recess while they cleaned up the last battle, but to get ready for the main event that would happen in fifteen minutes.

And Naruto froze. “Main-? Oh. That’s us.” his voice was small, somehow having forgotten what the pair of them were there for to begin with. It didn’t last long; Naruto’s emotions flipped once more without warning. A finger was in Sasuke’s face, and Naruto found his volume again. “We’re up next, Sasuke! Are you prepared to have your ass beaten in?!” A wild thing to be told by someone who had snot mixed into the tear tracks down his chin.

There were the taunts Sasuke had been expecting. He rolled his eyes, but the corners of his lips tugged tightly, forcing himself to look anywhere but at his hands, those fingertips... “Don’t think you’re gunna have an easy time of it, Uzumaki,” he bounced back at him.

With a scoff, Naruto smirked at him. “Fighting *you*? I’ve had harder times wrestling an ostrich.”

“…What?”

“Naruto-san, Sasuke-san,” they both turned to the official who had come to collect them as he bowed deeply. “Your battle will begin shortly. Are both of you ready?”

Naruto huffed, slewing, “That’s a question for you, Sasuke. Do you think you need more training?”

It was bait, and Sasuke knew the more he fed into it, the more riled up Naruto would be. Well, it would only be fair if he was, after all. “The only training I’m going to need is healing lessons, so I can mop you up afterwards.”

A fist was shaking in Sasuke’s face. “You’ll need it for yourself!”

Their official bowed again to them before taking his leave, wise enough to know that this taunting meant that they were ready. “Please wait here another moment longer while we prepare the field.”

“You want to make a bet?” Naruto chattered excitedly once the door shut and they were alone again.

“No.” Sasuke denied him, knowing that this more than anything would get under his skin the most.

Sure enough, Naruto grabbed the front of his cloak. “You bastard! What are you, scared?” The fabric at Sasuke’s throat was pulled taut, Naruto much closer than he should have allowed in the moment. Naruto was humming, continuing on declaring his bet anyway. “Hmm. If I win, you have to treat me to Ichiraku’s!” Could he be more predictable? “And if you win… hmm… what do you want? I mean, not that it’ll matter for you to state your terms, anyway, since *I’m* going to win.”

He was still too close, his hands, those hands, holding Sasuke hostage. Naruto smelled like he always did, a strange comfort for the moment. Sasuke could not control the way his tongue

flicked across his lower lip, wetting it. "…I'll tell you after," he promised, which he shouldn't have, he really, really shouldn't have.

This is what made Naruto aware of their current situation. Blue eyes flitted down to Sasuke's lips- a dangerous thing when they were surrounded by so many people. Not that any of them were really looking at them in their box. Naruto's hands clenched into Sasuke's cloak harder, those fingers that had discovered that new spot inside Sasuke's body just last week. Their bodies were practically flush together. Sasuke could feel Naruto's heartbeat- or was it his own?

They couldn't kiss so close to the railing. It would be dumb for them to do it, anyway, regardless of how much Sasuke wanted to. The people above them weren't an issue, as it was impossible for any of them to see without scaling down the wall, but anyone across the arena could look their way and see them clear as day. Naruto frowned, his lips pouting at the crowd around them. "Come here," he said.

And Sasuke was being dragged to the back wall of the room. Being this far back blocked the angle of the stands on the other side of the field. Before Sasuke could protest, Naruto's lips were on his. Every nerve ending in Sasuke's body was lit up, his body jerking with the surprise of being kissed when he knew they shouldn't. "N-Naruto!" Sasuke warned, barely managing to fend him off for a moment to speak.

"Shh," Naruto shushed him, coming in close again. "If I don't do this now, I'll probably do it by accident in the middle of our battle." That would be a problem. Perhaps it was a good thing for them to get it out of their system before that happened.

So he let Naruto kiss him like that, pressed against the wall, minutes before they were to battle in front of the largest crowd in ninja history. With lips softer than cotton, contrasting brilliantly with sharp, nibbling teeth. Sasuke's senses filled with Naruto- his scent, his taste, his feel. It was rushed and thrilling and intoxicating, and Sasuke had half of a mind to blow off the whole thing and drag Naruto back to his apartment-

Naruto pulled back, one finger against Sasuke's lips. His eyelids were orange- Sage mode. That was why Naruto's chakra had felt warmer than usual. They were so close that the cloak of energy had seeped around Sasuke, too. He had thought the kiss had just been *that* good. With moments to spare, Naruto dropped his Sage mode and strolled away, hands behind his head as if they hadn't just been a few kisses away from undoing each other's pants.

Their official was back, guiding them out of the room and down several flights of stairs. Sasuke forced himself to remain unaffected, for his face to remain its usual pale color instead of the tomato red it was trying to be. It was difficult, because he still felt Naruto all over his senses. He couldn't let it distract him, because his goal now was to battle Naruto- with fists. The distinction had to be made. He remembered the crowd, how Orochimaru was planning something. That brought him back into the headspace he needed. He'd be fighting Naruto, but one eye was going to remain focused on the crowd. That was his plan. They came to the end of the hallway, the daylight streaming inside.

Just a few steps until they were at the entrance of the field, a warm, vaguely familiar sensation rested on Sasuke's right ass cheek. Naruto's hand squeezed once, hard, before it

disappeared.

Sharingan activated, Sasuke snapped his head up to his offender's face. His pursed lips hiding his smirk was the only indication that Naruto was aware of what he had done; he was looking straight ahead and did not acknowledge Sasuke's glare at all. Sasuke saw red, as if it were possible to color his vision with the anger he felt. Or maybe it was the red in his face that had seeped into his eyesight, which he had lost control over the instant Naruto's hand was on him. Or possibly he had unlocked a new level to his Sharingan. His entire body was tingling, especially the area radiating with electricity over where Naruto had just squeezed.

Sasuke could do nothing but run expletives at the idiot's expense through his mind, because Naruto had timed it so that they were on the field in front of the crowd and cameras in the very next moment. Suddenly, Sasuke had no reserves about being the cause of Naruto losing his second hand.

The crowd was deafening upon their arrival, enough to pull the slightest bit of focus out of Sasuke's ire. From inside the arena he could get a more accurate sense of just how many people there were. Tens of thousands, it had to be- if not over a hundred thousand. How was Konoha housing all of these people tonight? Surely they did not have enough inns for all of this.

The announcer took control of the field for a moment, explaining that for the safety of the viewers, a barrier would be placed around the stands. Good. That meant Sasuke could basically go all-out without worrying. The announcer continued on for a minute, some bullshit about the war that Sasuke tuned out. His fist was itching to shatter one of Naruto's bones- any bone, honestly. Any reserve that Sasuke had felt about throwing the match had completely vanished. Originally, he hadn't really cared about this phony battle, and if it gave more reason for Naruto to become a chunin, then he would have previously been fine with losing on purpose. Definitely not anymore. Perhaps he never would have let it happen, anyway, once the battle started. He so very much did hate losing to Naruto.

Then their official guided them into their starting positions, some 20 meters distance. Sasuke had already found his switching point: a rock just behind Naruto's left foot.

The moment the official's hand signaled the start of the match, Sasuke was behind Naruto, his fist having made contact with his cheekbone in the next instant. It was too quick for him to dodge when he wasn't in Sage mode yet, so Naruto took the punch, his body flying off with the force of it. The crowd was instantly screaming. However cheap a shot it was, Naruto deserved it and more. Sasuke found his next destination to meet Naruto before he hit the ground, and was there in an instant to catch him with the hard jab of his knee.

But instead of lodging into Naruto's ribs, Sasuke's knee connected into the flesh of Naruto's palm. Eyelids flushed orange and horizonal slits to his irises, Naruto was able to keep up with him. He was smirking as he pushed Sasuke backwards. They both landed safely. The deafening roar of the crowd from the sudden start of the battle was already obnoxious. Sasuke tuned them out; he had more important things to focus on. Like beating Naruto concave.

“I’m glad that worked. I was worried that you weren’t going to give me a real fight.” He wanted a real fight? Of course he did. So that grope was just insurance to make sure Sasuke came at him with intent. What an idiot. Well, if he wanted his death to have an audience, then that was his choice. He lunged at Naruto again, his desire to inflict more damage even greater than before.

Figuring it would be good to feel each other out with taijutsu first, Sasuke made his attack. The tone of the battle was already set by Sasuke’s first hit; they were not training, here. Sasuke was angry enough about the grope that he didn’t have any reservations about doing the pervert real harm. Naruto would heal by the end of the day, anyway. He could handle a few perfectly deserved kicks, if Sasuke could manage to get them in.

Their taijutsu at their present stages, Mangekyou and Sage mode, were pretty even. They were both fast enough to see and counter the other’s movements. Sasuke was slightly faster, and angrier, and managed to get a few shots in. But he knew it would be short lived with how easily Naruto could slip into Bijuu mode, which would be harder for Sasuke to deal with. Other issues would come with the clones. Sasuke made certain to slap Naruto’s hands away every time they came close to performing the seal that summoned them. The longer he denied him the clones the better, because once they were around it would be harder to catch the real one.

After taking a few too many hits, the bright cloak of emanating chakra covered Naruto. The Kyuubi’s chakra enhanced him, and Sasuke no longer had the upper hand. It was like their spars, only much faster. Neither of them could quite land a hit on the other, their superb power matched by the other’s near impenetrable defense. Naruto’s punches were heavy, but Sasuke could dodge them at his speed. They weren’t getting anywhere like this; Sasuke supposed he needed to pull out a jutsu soon, because he would win no battles against Naruto in endurance.

He was just thinking it over when Naruto came in close, his voice a low whisper. “I should grab your ass more often.” It was too quiet for anyone else to have heard it over the roar of the crowd at their distance, but still, the daringness to say such a thing when they were holding the attention of an arena of thousands. Sasuke knew what Naruto was trying to do; all of the taunts Naruto had ever thrown at him were nothing compared to it, and he knew it. It was just meant to rile him up to his most extreme.

And it worked. Sasuke was enraged enough by it to catch Naruto in the side with his retaliating kick, a few of the ribs audibly cracking. If Naruto had wanted this, then Sasuke would demonstrate to him how incredibly foolish of a wish it was. Sasuke’s Rinnegan twinged as he caught Naruto in midair with his Bansho Tenin, pulling the lecher down to be skewered onto the point of his blade.

All that happened though was a red mass of chakra grasping the blade like a large fist, preventing Naruto from being pierced. The idiot was smiling, of all things, chuckling at Sasuke’s reaction as if he almost didn’t have his spleen forcibly punctured. His eye throbbed painfully, so he let the Bansho Tenin drop. Not wanting to part with his blade, he sent a wave of lightning through it. It wasn’t powerful enough to inflict any damage to Naruto, but it did loosen the chakra enough for him to free his weapon from it.

Naruto was attempting the seal again, and Sasuke sliced upward to block the hands from connecting. It left an opening for the hand-like red chakra to grab him around his middle. Panicking, Sasuke called forth the ribcage of his Susanoo, thickening the circumference until it was too large for the hand to try to grasp. There wasn't enough power to the chakra for Naruto to budge the Susanoo like that.

But that didn't seem to be what Naruto had been trying to do. The split second he had Sasuke contained was enough to spawn in hundreds of clones, each with its own Rasengan. Sasuke cursed to himself for letting it happen, even though he knew it was inevitable. Whatever. He was used to fighting clones. He dropped the Susanoo to handle them the way he knew best. They came at him, and he dealt with each of them in turn, letting the choreography he had by now ingrained into his subconscious take care of them while he laid out his options. They would be easier for him to deal with in the air. He hadn't wanted to get so deep into this fight so as to pull out his Susanoo to its highest form simply to grant him that mobility. Garuda would do.

With a bite to his thumb in his next opening, he summoned the hawk, abandoning the taijutsu to leap up onto its back. Careful to keep the original Naruto in his sight, Sasuke clocked the clones rushing him with their foreboding balls of energy. He urged Garuda upwards, and the clones fell into a convenient line following after him. A well-crafted ball of fire took a large portion of them out, granting him the time he needed to get higher.

From the distance, Sasuke was able to assess their battle with more clarity. Naruto could certainly reach this height by using his clones, but for what? The ones that made it up here wouldn't have the numbers to do him any significant harm; this left Naruto's option to be to come up here himself. But Naruto would be wiser to use the distance to his advantage and plot out his own course of action, like Sasuke was, and wait for Sasuke to come down to him instead.

It became apparent that Naruto had a third option only after the gargantuan puff of smoke filled their enclosure. The giant toad, Gamabunta. Cursing under his breath, Sasuke pulled Garuda up higher into the air, even though he knew the toad would easily be able to reach them with one swift hop- not to mention he could shoot them out of the air with his oil. It was a perfect counter for Sasuke's summon to get him back into close range.

Naruto wasn't thinking like that, though. Sasuke used his summon, and Naruto saw it as an opportunity to one-up him.

His bravado, arms crossed, smiling broadly on top of the giant summon's head, faltered when the toad scolded him. "Where have you summoned me now, boy? You're fighting the Uchiha kid? I thought you guys were good, now. Don't tell me he's gone bad again."

Naruto clenched his fist, yelling down under him, "Of course he hasn't! This is the Chunin exams!"

"You summoned me for something as meaningless as an exam? What am I to you, boy?!"

Stomping his foot, Naruto childishly whined at him. "It's not meaningless! Just help me kick Sasuke's ass so I can become a chunin already!"

Gamabunta reared his gigantic body, unsettling Naruto on top of him as he argued back, “Don’t stomp your feet on me, brat!”

Not wanting to let the opportunity of a distracted opponent slip by, Sasuke began pulling out shuriken, each one laden with concealed thread. Garuda swooped him down to the far side of the arena so he could begin arranging his plan. The spinning stars hit their mark every time, even when they missed the clones. Though Naruto was distracted, the clones were less so; they were able to dodge the first shuriken, but Sasuke would get them with the second or third. It was all for the better, anyway. His real target was the ground below their feet. The clones provided an excellent cover for what he was doing.

It wasn’t long before his antics were noticed. Gamabunta must have decided to stay, because Sasuke was then also dodging the giant drops of toad oil zooming at him like comets on top of all of the Rasengans he had to deflect. Garuda was made for these kinds of maneuvers, though. Sasuke felt comfortable knowing he could leave it to the hawk to do most of the evasions. He focused on his shuriken, watching them pop clone after clone then lodge safely into the ground. Before long, he would have the whole arena.

If only the arena wasn’t so large this year. He had plenty of shuriken and twine, but not so much time. He knew he would have to be quick, especially with the twine he laid down closer to the giant toad.

He managed to only lay down about half of what he hoped he’d be able to; thankfully, he did span the arena once, so he covered a lot of the ground. His jig was caught by the toad, whose warning, “He’s laying down twine!” was what signaled that he needed to act before any of the shuriken were dislodged. Hopping from Garuda, Sasuke dived for the ground to the nearest bit of metal he could find. He had his last shuriken in his hand and released it to wrap around one of Gamabunta’s large legs before he leaped.

His body prickled with the sensation of his Chidori, summoning a great chunk of chakra to make it as strong as possible. He stabbed his sword into his chosen shuriken, the electricity flowing through both bits of metal. Then, the entire arena lit up in blue sparks.

The few hundred clones still left all vanished in the surge. It seemed that he had plenty of metal laden around the arena for his electric currant to exonerate them all. Some of the bits of metal were close enough to leap over the ground he hadn’t covered with twine to connect together. He turned a calculated eye to the large summon; it seemed Gamabunta had anticipated Sasuke’s attack and attempted to leap, but didn’t have time to free himself from the twine around his leg. The electricity had him freeze in midair, gravity pulling his heavy body to the earth with a shattering *thud*, where more metal twine could reinforce the currant.

Sasuke was not foolish enough to think that his mere chakra alone would be enough to take down that toad. In fact, he was quite surprised it managed to stun him at all. Curiously, Sasuke looked for the shuriken he had thrown; it had lodged, not into Gamabunta’s leg, but to his feet, right in between his long-fingered toes. It seemed that Sasuke had just gotten lucky and hit a nerve through softer patch of skin. His twine carried his chakra as electricity and multiplied the energy between the bits of metal, so that the currant that reached Gamabunta was just as strong as if Sasuke had been touching him himself. He had gotten lucky, but it

wasn't much damage to the giant toad in the long run. He had been more concerned with handling the clones.

Naruto himself had not taken any damage. With Gamabunta's warning, he had time to hop off of the toad's head before the lightning attack reached him and found a patch of ground Sasuke hadn't the time to cover to land on. Sasuke let his jutsu fade, knowing he wouldn't be able to do any more substantial attack with it.

Gamabunta stood up, and it was as Sasuke had expected that he had not been very damaged. He was already gearing up another round of oil bullets. Even with the distance, Sasuke knew he needed to move quickly; each drop of oil was large enough to fill a pond and thus required more speed to evade. Garuda had come back for him, and Sasuke grabbed onto one of his talons to hoist himself onto his back again. Garuda flew him safely out of the oncoming attack.

"Get in closer," he commanded his hawk, who obliged dutifully, swerving through the showering of dangerous oil being spewed at them.

Sasuke couldn't imagine there would be anything he could do about Gamabunta but to wait for his summon time to run out. Let him lose enough chakra that he had to return. But a fight with Naruto had to be dealt with quickly. He could attempt to speed up the process by facing him head on for a bit, but he would need to do so safely. Summoning Aoda to fend him off was a possibility, but frankly Sasuke wasn't in the mood for another summon, and a battle between snake and toad was bound to get annoying. He had another idea.

Frankly, Sasuke chose his second option only because he was curious to see how it would work out.

As soon as he was in range, Sasuke dismissed Garuda; he wouldn't be needed anymore. He was close enough to lock eyes with Naruto, who had watched him dismount, falling to the ground. Naruto was quick to race to him, intending to engage him in close range once he landed.

But once Sasuke's feet hit the ground, the ribcage of his Susanoo encased him, growing larger by the second. Naruto hit the wall of it head on, having not expected it in the moment. He was tossed backward from the recoil. Gamabunta was on him with his sword, clashing its gargantuan blade against the bones of the forearms of the Susanoo, which had been brought up to block the hit. True to its name, Sasuke's perfect defense was powerful enough to fend off the attack, even when Gamabunta doubled down his strength on it. Sasuke smirked to himself.

The smirk faded when a mouthful of oil drenched his Susanoo's skull. The pure nature energy of the oil was something to revere; the skull began to melt, the purple chakra around it dispersing out uselessly. Ignoring the pain in his eyes, Sasuke surged his energy into his defense. Flesh bubbled out of the bones of his Susanoo, the skull reappearing as a head, and then a helmet as the rest of the defense armored itself. Gamabunta's sword felt much lighter despite not having lost any prowess.

The toad attempted another direct shot of oil. A hot surge of satisfaction overcame Sasuke. There was no disintegrating, this time. The oil dripped down the armor, and Sasuke watched it splash in great puddles on the ground around his purple enclosure. With his Susanoo now immune to the oil, he was safe to sit back and bide his time.

Gamabunta pulled back to rear up another attack with his blade, which the arm of the Susanoo slapped aside. In the opening, he pulled back an arrow. He wouldn't take the battle far enough to land a purposeful hit with it. That would cause too much damage, and he had nothing against the toad, and it still wasn't a real battle despite how pissed off he was at Naruto's lecherous hand. But he let the arrow go, giving the toad plenty of time to retreat. The earth between them shattered, leaving a large crater. It wasn't nearly as big as it should have been, if Sasuke had really meant it. He didn't want to battle Gamabunta. He wanted Naruto.

He kept an eye on Naruto, expecting him to garner help from the Kyuubi at any second. He was kneeling on the ground, the cloak of the Bijuu mode billowing, but he wasn't making any move yet. Naruto knew that enabling the fox's largest form would be the only way to come at him when his armored Susanoo was out. Sasuke could manifest the legs whenever he wanted and gain the mobility needed to combat him. He doubted Naruto would take out a Bijuu Bomb here; the arena grounds would be beyond repair, though the barriers would probably hold to keep the stands safe. But even if he did, Sasuke knew the Susanoo would be able to take a few direct hits from it.

Another swipe of Gamabunta's sword came at him, and this time Sasuke caught it with both hands of the Susanoo. What was Naruto doing? It was certainly not like him to sit back in a fight. But he was still kneeling over there, waiting. For what? For Sasuke to run out of chakra? That would certainly only benefit him, but that wasn't Naruto's fighting style. Did he not want to call out that larger form of the Kyuubi, then? Sasuke couldn't see why he wouldn't want to; the audience, so annoyingly enthused about the entire affair, had all of the protection from whatever the pair of them did in the arena, thanks to the barrier. The Naruto that Sasuke knew would love to show off that form.

Was he afraid of hurting Sasuke? Ridiculous. Sasuke banished the thought. This battle wasn't real. The blood and bruises were part of the appeal, and Naruto would be the one to heal him immediately after, anyway. They were fine to battle this way, because neither of them could really hurt the other anymore. Sasuke would be in his Susanoo, which was strong enough to withstand direct blows from a creature with power akin to a bijuu. They would do more damage to each other without it; the Susanoo wasn't called 'The Perfect Defense' for nothing.

The perfection of such defense was something to be infinitely grateful for, Sasuke lamented, as he often did when he was inside of the purple mass. Grateful to his clan for developing it, and grateful to his brother for granting him a way to use it safely. It came at an awful price, but the ability to protect himself because of it was invaluable. Sasuke's Susanoo was laden with his brother's protection. Gamabunta's strength was immense and awe inspiring, but with this defense Sasuke could keep even him at bay with respectively little energy. Sasuke, through his lifetime of hardship, had been given this defense from his genealogy, who had all known love and loss and the despair that came with it. Their shared DNA knew the pain and

gave them the perfect way to protect themselves from it. *Because* of it. Sasuke could block out the world in this isolated cage, if he wanted to.

"You really didn't notice I just walked in here, did you?"

Horrorstricken, Sasuke turned his head. Somehow- *somehow*- Naruto was right behind him, holding a kunai at his throat. The solid purple chakra, the impenetrable armor, the iron flesh, the impermeable bones- *somehow*, Naruto had gotten past them all, was standing directly in the middle of Sasuke's perfect defense.

Was it genjutsu? No- Sasuke could not be under a genjutsu- Naruto didn't know how to *use* genjutsu. He wasn't even in Sage mode. That made no sense. Hadn't Naruto just been in front of him, cloaked in the combined Bijuu-Sage mode, running into the walls of this very Susanoo? He had kept his eye on him the entire time. Desperate, Sasuke found the spot he had last seen, and sure enough, there he was. In that brightly luminating chakra, kneeling on the ground. Sasuke was not a sensory type, but even he could feel that power emanating across the way, could see it with his Mangekyou Sharingan.

Then, that Naruto popped. A clone? Impossible- Sasuke had *known* that other Naruto had been the original. It had to be. He could *see* the chakra level with his eyes, that immense, boundless, bright chakra. This Naruto, the one behind him, didn't have any of that. Except that he did, as soon as the clone vanished, reinforcing the fact that he *was* the real one, and somehow had managed to get passed the perfect defense without either of his chakra-induced powerups.

Naruto dropped the hand holding the kunai by Sasuke's throat. He wasn't in any type of battle stance. Sasuke's head swirled, all of his thoughts meshing around, how it was possible- from underground, maybe? Was the barrier weaker there? Or perhaps some type of chakra-melting technique or weapon, like the Truth-Seeking Orbs. But Naruto should not have any more of those. He lost them in their battle a year ago. Could he make them on his own, now?

Mouth dry, Sasuke searched Naruto's eyes for the answer. The answer wasn't clear; Naruto's eyes were soft and blue, so blue. "H-How?" he eventually rasped.

With a gentle laugh, Naruto tilted his head. "We've gotten really good at merging our chakras, haven't we?"

Did he mean…?

Sasuke assessed himself. It took him only a moment to make sense of that familiar, warm energy coursing through his own body. Naruto's chakra, which Naruto must have placed in him at some point- at-

The kiss?

Sasuke's eyes went wide, and Naruto was smiling. It was a close-mouthed one. Heart thumping, Sasuke put the pieces together, how Naruto must have mingled their chakra, pulled out some of Sasuke's chakra and replaced it with his own, how Sasuke had been so used to the feel of Naruto that he hadn't *noticed*. And when Sasuke had used his ninjutsu, Naruto

hadn't been injured. His Lightning Style hadn't affected him, not because Naruto somehow found a bare patch of the arena to land on, but because the chakra used had been in part his own, a mixture between both of their chakras.

And thus, Naruto could walk right through the Perfect Defense. He divided his chakra unevenly, leaving the larger part in a diversionary clone, leaving his real self with the portion of chakra he had stolen from Sasuke when they had kissed. And then he waltzed right through the armor, the flesh, and the bone. And Sasuke hadn't noticed.

Sasuke dropped his Susanoo, Gamabunta falling back, knowing that the time for attacking was over. The battle was done. Sasuke's head was still swirling, still making sense of the situation. The defense gifted to him by his ancestors, earned through death and loss, the one only he and one other in his clan had ever been able to wield safely. It was a jutsu that had been crafted for centuries, and Sasuke had done every diligence of study on it out there. He had read the texts from ancient times, ones locked away in his clan's temple. Never, in not one of them, did they say that the Perfect Defense could have such a weakness.

Even with whatever amount of Naruto's chakra mixed into it, surely the Susanoo should not have welcomed him into it so easily. Surely Sasuke should have noticed it, even with Naruto subduing his chakra signature and using mainly what he had of Sasuke's. Was it because Sasuke had shielded Naruto with it in the past? That he let him in before, last year, during the war? But even the next day, when they almost killed each other, Naruto had not been able to manage what he had just done now. Just minutes earlier, Naruto had smashed himself into its armor. How was he able to breech the shield, the walls built stronger by his endless grief-?

The word sparked a memory. That reanimated version of the Second Hokage last year. He had spoken about the Uchihas' Curse of Hatred, how their eyes evolved due to that emotion; their grief gave into a biological change in the chemistry of their brains. How the stages of the Sharingan were indication of the effects of that manifested hatred.

How wrong that man had been.

At the epicenter of all grief is love. The evolution of the Sharingan is only ever brought upon by the clearest moments of intense love, which is often at the heart of the most painful grief. It was true that the Uchiha would go to any means to protect that love, but Sasuke had learned that hatred had no place in the things he had done. He had sought after Itachi in his youth, not because Itachi had manipulated his hatred, but because he had enforced Sasuke's need to protect the sanctity of his love for his clan. He couldn't let that love be soiled any further by letting the assailant run free. After Itachi's death, Sasuke found the new assailant responsible within the government of Konoha. His love for Itachi sought to avenge, to lift all that had burdened him with such a terrible life, to finally give Itachi the peace he deserved. His love for his brother couldn't be kept safe with that government, so he sought to change it. Even now, Sasuke's love for his clan and for his brother is what motivated his actions.

His eyes were developed in love. For centuries, the Uchiha manifested their love into shields, always protecting one another. It was love that armored the Susanoo.

And it was love that could pierce it.

Naruto was battered from battle, but it didn't mar him. His blue eyes, his soft, pink lips, his warm energy. Sasuke's blood was rushing, his heart was all he could hear, thumping in his ears. The quirk of Naruto's smile grew, and Sasuke took a long moment to watch it. It took an eon, but eventually Sasuke took notice of the fact that Naruto had his hand out in front of them both. Fist clenched, knuckles presented. A fist bump. The only thing left to do was meet it, so Sasuke did. Naruto had won their battle.

Naruto had won.

The rush of chakra flowed into him again through the touch of their fists. The energy healed his wounds, but that wasn't all; it brought him back into the reality of where they were. Slowly, the rushing in his ears could be differentiated from the noise of the crowd around them, which was a strangely similar sound. Sasuke blinked around at them, realizing at once how little he had paid attention to them all during the battle.

He felt naked in front of them. Sasuke didn't like crowds to begin with, but usually he did not care of anyone's opinion enough to really mind that they were looking at him. Now though, with his head still reeling, with Naruto's warmth enveloping him- he wished nothing more than to vanish with him, to be secluded with him instead. It wasn't a moment he wanted anyone else near. There was a strong desire to grab Naruto and run that nagged at Sasuke to get out.

Gamabunta congratulated Naruto before disappearing, his time up. The crowd was unintelligible, all screaming at once, and Sasuke could not tell whether they were cheering Naruto on or protesting the end of the match, wishing it to go on longer. But Naruto had won, and no one would be able to deny it. Sasuke hadn't had another defense. Naruto had free choice of which vital spot he could have incapacitated Sasuke with. The fact that he hadn't even punched Sasuke when he was so vulnerable was something for him to lock away until he was in a safer place to examine it.

An enhanced voice came through the speakers around the arena. "I believe the match needs to be called," came Kakashi's voice, and Sasuke turned his head up to the box with the Kages and Feudal Lords. "The win goes to-"

An explosion came from the center of the village, the very earth trembling greatly beneath their feet. And Sasuke was hit with the realization that he had forgotten.

"Orochimaru," he whispered, his own shock stunning him.

As soon as he said it, the walls around them went dark, those purple barriers getting thicker, turning into a barrier of dark red, then surpassing even that until it was almost black. Sasuke watched horrified as another dark barrier was around the Kages, imprisoning them in their luxury box. The dark walls surrounded the arena, locking all of the attendance in the audience to their seats.

Sasuke had never seen such a barrier before. Purple, then red, then black. Did that mean that it was stronger than the Four Red Yang? *What* had Orochimaru been working on so openly underneath ANBU noses?

Arm coming out in front of Naruto on instinct, Sasuke's eyes searched around them. Where was he? And how had Sasuke gotten so damn *distracted*? Not once during his fight did Sasuke remember what should have been his top priority. He was supposed to keep an eye on Orochimaru, and he hadn't even taken a moment to find him in the crowd before it got to this point.

"Wh- What?" Naruto stuttered, taken aback by the sudden events.

Anger surging, Sasuke spat at him, "I *told* you all that Orochimaru was planning something!"

A few feet away from them, the ground cracked. "Always so suspicious of me," came the oily voice. Orochimaru sprouted from the ground, his body a sort of liquid as it squeezed through the crack. It had to have been in conjunction with a transportation jutsu, because there had not been any chakra there a moment before.

Sasuke wasted no time, and neither did Naruto. They raced toward him, manifesting their individual chakra into their hands in tandem. Sasuke felt the waves of energy beside him, Naruto cloaking himself once again to maximize his speed and damage.

A frontal attack to Orochimaru had to be done with vast swiftness, which both he and Naruto possessed. Both the Chidori and the Rasengan pierced him through his chest. The warm wetness of Orochimaru's blood soaked Sasuke's arm all of the way past his elbow. Coughing the blood that had filled his throat, Orochimaru praised them, "Your speed is quite admirable. I could hardly keep up with you two."

Around them, four ANBU had made it to their location to aide; they must have been on guard inside the barriers. Sasuke scoffed away the transparent compliment, but Naruto demanded, "What are you planning?"

"A few things," Orochimaru smirked at them. Sasuke tugged on his arm, meeting resistance as Orochimaru's body healed itself around it. "But it would be easier to accomplish with you two contained, first."

A tight black barrier popped up around them, barely a few square meters in size. Quickly turning to see, Sasuke was confronted with the realization that the ANBU had not arrived to aid them. One of each of them were at the corners of the barrier to lock them in confinement.

"Yamato-taichou?!" Naruto exclaimed. "What are you doing?!" Sasuke found the ANBU Naruto had been screaming at, his old captain. He was wearing his mask, but Naruto was in Sage mode and must have been able to sense his chakra. He did not respond at all to his name being shouted. "You brainwashed him!" Naruto accused, his voice growling.

"Did I?" Orochimaru mused. So that was how he managed to do this. He had hoodwinked his ANBU. By the looks of it, Sasuke assumed as he eyed the rest of the arena, he had managed to get his hands on a large majority of them. And even the secret agents from other villages. There was a good hundred of them with their hands occupied reinforcing the barrier jutsu. "Well, I am looking forward to a very important conversation with you two, however I am currently rather busy. This will hold you until I get back," Orochimaru teased them, and his body turned to slime again, draining down the crack in the ground too thin for anyone else to

fit through. The chakra disappeared; there was a teleportation jutsu involved in it like Sasuke had assumed. His eyes caught where Orochimaru had appeared on the other side of their wall, still inside the arena. He gripped Naruto's wrist tightly.

In the next moment, Sasuke had transported them in place of one of the shuriken from their battle that had been situated directly behind his target. He dropped Naruto in favor of lodging his sword into Orochimaru's skull, in one temple and out of the other. "No, it won't," he refuted.

Slowly, Orochimaru turned his head, completely unbothered by the metal currently piercing his brain. Sasuke could feel the nausea rising in him at the sight, which only doubled when Orochimaru remarked dangerously, "What a marvelous Rinnegan."

A sword thrusted from Orochimaru's snake-like dislodged jaw, and Sasuke was forced to abandon his weapon in Orochimaru's skull to dodge it. But Naruto was on it, rushing in to grasp the hilt. With a swift slice, he freed the blade, cutting a clean swipe to Orochimaru's head. He tossed it immediately back to Sasuke. The head was already healing; it was a culmination of the research on Suigetsu's Water style technique, surely. They would need more than taijutsu to damage him. Even the direct blow of the Rasengan and Chidori hadn't done much.

"Orochimaru! Why are you attacking Konoha?" Naruto screamed. They had Orochimaru surrounded, Sasuke at his front, Naruto behind him. "You had been given a second chance!"

"It seems like we're going to have that important conversation now, then. I have my reasons for this," Orochimaru smiled as though pleasantly. "After careful consideration, I've found that I've been wronged." Sasuke utilized the distraction to manipulate his Chidori, extending it further out if front of him toward Orochimaru's chest, aiming for his heart. The sound of it alerted him, and he was able to jump upward away from it, outside of its reach. "We were having a conversation," Orochimaru scolded him.

Sasuke scoffed his annoyance. "Shut up."

He pulled out his Susanoo, making it clear that he was not going to participate in such a chat. Bones, flesh, then armor. The pain in his eyes surged; even with the slight buff he had gotten from Naruto after their battle, he had used them too much. There wasn't anything he could do about that now, though. He would have to push through it. "Sasuke!" Naruto called to him, and then he was being joined by the large fox. It was good that he knew they would need this power against Orochimaru.

Slowly, the purple and orange chakra seeped together, and Sasuke's Susanoo covered the Kyuubi in its armor. They floated together inside its head. "My, what an interesting pair you two make," Orochimaru observed, his smile growing wider at them. Sasuke's stomach churned over at the insinuation. "Tell me, Sasuke, how *did* Naruto manage to get inside your Susanoo so easily?"

Sasuke's body went numb; there was absolutely no doubt to it that Orochimaru *knew*. And for how long? Sasuke had not let himself fully recognize it, too terrified of that horror, but it was true. Had Orochimaru put it to words back in the lab? Or before then? During the war? This

weakness- Orochimaru knew it. He had sought Naruto out before the exams. What had he been planning, and what was he planning *now*? Did this attack really have to do with Konoha, or was it specifically geared toward them?

“Maybe I’m just more powerful than you think!” Naruto retorted, completely oblivious to the danger they were both in.

“That you most certainly are,” Orochimaru agreed darkly.

And Sasuke had the desire to run again. To flee the arena, the dimension, to take Naruto with him where it was safe and where Orochimaru could never reach them. Sasuke had the only Rinnegan left in the world, the only Sharingan that could be used to create another. If they fled, no one would be able to follow them. His heart thumped, and he reached for Naruto’s hand-

“We have to free the Kage; they can help us contain him quicker to minimize the damage to the village,” Naruto directed him, and Sasuke’s hand stopped in its track.

In what world would he be able to pull Naruto away from Konoha when it was under attack? He’d only demand to come back, resent him for every second he was away. What was Sasuke thinking, that he could isolate Naruto to one of those awful dimensions, separating him from everyone he loved? They would have to return at some point. Orochimaru would still be here.

No. Orochimaru needed to die. Again. Today.

“Do a Bijuu Bomb first,” Sasuke insisted.

“I can’t,” Naruto told him, and Sasuke followed his gaze as it looked downward to the four ANBU staring up at them. They were trapped in the arena together; he and Naruto would be safe in their defense, but with the enclosed area, those four, including his old captain, would likely not survive the entrapped explosion. Damn them.

Planetary Destruction. The Mangekyou still in Sasuke’s left eye was already being stretched to its max holding this form of the Susanoo, but the Rinnegan portion still had something left in it. He should still be able to do it, especially if Naruto helped, but that would only seal Orochimaru, not kill him. And Sasuke was not sure what kind of teleportation jutsu Orochimaru had been using; if he wasted his chakra on such a large jutsu only for it to fail, he would become useless for the rest of the fight.

“Sasuke,” Naruto addressed him again, and Sasuke met his eye. “We can free the Kages.”

“Oh, but does he *want* to free the Kages?” Sasuke’s head snapped back to Orochimaru, who was giving him a calculated look. No, Sasuke did not want to free the Kages. If he did, they would get in the way of Sasuke killing him. Or worse, one of them would get to it first. “You know, I just had an excellent idea. It would seem that Sasuke and I have similar goals at the moment.”

“What are you talking about?!” Naruto shouted, a sense of panic in his voice that brought Sasuke’s head into focus.

He didn't need Orochimaru to spell it out for him to know what he meant, but he couldn't do anything to stop him from continuing on. "One of the reasons I came here today mirrors a certain desire of his. I heard that the Kages and Feudal Lords would all be in assembly today and saw a grand opportunity. What chaos the world would be in if something were to happen in Konoha today. And there they all are," he gestured to the group of them, all tucked away in their barrier, "in a nice little box."

Sasuke had thought the exact same thing that morning.

"See, all I want is revenge. I don't quite care about the aftermath," Orochimaru continued, and Sasuke's throat was too thick to swallow properly. "But I do suppose it would leave quite a desirable outcome for Sasuke's revolution, wouldn't it? Destroy then rebuild, isn't that right? I personally don't have much desire to rule."

"You're- You're crazy!" Naruto called him, but there was a waiver in his voice. Fear. "Sasuke's-" he turned to him, and then was unable to continue.

No Feudal Lords, no Kages, and no Elders, who were also in that box. It was more than Sasuke could have hoped for a year ago. Destroy, then rebuild. And here Naruto was, already favored as the next Hokage, already respected and admired by every citizen in the other countries, all vulnerable without leaders. They could be united by Naruto.

But in allowing so to happen, he would lose Naruto for good.

Was Sasuke prepared for that? To fall back into loneliness? Sasuke did not need to become Hokage anymore. Naruto was right there. He would take the position and unite the countries in the absence of their leaders. If Sasuke killed them all, today, it would happen. But he would never be able to face Naruto again, if he did. He would be back to solitude. And with it, he would abandon Naruto for good. It could be for the best…

But *would* it be for the best? He couldn't tell. All of his senses were rushing past him. He remembered, oh, he remembered, what it had been like. Back then, he hadn't been able to see it clearly, but he certainly could now. The pain. Sasuke had gotten a taste of what it was like to live without it, and could now see just how much pain he had been in for all of those years. How much it hurt. He had been numb to it, in the moment; the pain had been too much for him to feel it all. Could Sasuke go back to that now that he knew what it was like without it? Like that mattress- every night he slept elsewhere was unbearable in a way he had never known before.

He met Naruto's eyes. They weren't blue, currently. And they were more scared than Sasuke had ever seen them.

It set Sasuke's resolve. He had trusted Naruto. The entire *point* of this past year was about laying his trust in Naruto. With a jolt, Sasuke was plagued by the realization of what Orochimaru was doing to him. To think Sasuke would let him manipulate him, after everything. Sasuke would never let that happen again. His trust was all he had left to hold himself up. He gave Naruto one clear, determined nod, and held out his hand. Naruto stared down at where he was pouring out his chakra into a mass. It didn't matter that Orochimaru could see their new jutsu being formed. He was going to die today, anyway.

The breath kicked out of Naruto's lungs, shaking on its way. That fear of his, it was rooted deep. Sasuke could see how he had buried it under layers and layers of affirmations, of boastful trust, of constant insinuations of Sasuke's character. But the fear was still there, however he tried to cover it. That fear of abandonment, that Sasuke was going to leave him again and never come back. He supposed that fear would never leave, not fully, and perhaps that was Sasuke's price to pay. Or perhaps instead it was the result of his childhood of loneliness, another thing to spite the village for. But Sasuke wouldn't abandon him.

Naruto's chakra met his own, and for a moment there was a black fog, but then a brilliant luminescent light. The solid chakra was a comforting weight between them, indestructible. Together, they guided it directly at the barrier.

It shattered through the first wall surrounding the audience, it's unstoppable force not even wavering as it broke through the black barrier. Then, just as effortlessly, it crashed through the second, freeing the Kage.

Sasuke had never seen Orochimaru that surprised. It was a satisfying sight. "The future is not yours to decide," Sasuke spat at him.

A slow smirk came over Orochimaru's face. And Sasuke knew, after a tense moment, that he had made some sort of a mistake by the mere sight of it. That was a look that indicated he had walked right into the snake's trap. "Congratulations, Sasuke," he slewed, and a jolt of dread settled low in Sasuke's stomach. "You passed your exam."

Exam?

Exam.

Sasuke looked in horror over to the luxury box. The Kage were not rushing in to help them. The stands around them were all cheering; they should have been evacuating, getting out of the way. It made no sense; the Raikage should have cleared the distance between them the instant the barrier shattered, his personality and skill in mind. Kakashi- why was he sitting? And Gaara, to think he wouldn't rush to Naruto's side…

The dots connected. How impossible it would have been to have placed so many ANBU and the like under such a genjutsu. The perfection of the entire ordeal, having all the world's important leaders in jeopardy at once, with nothing but Sasuke's decision to protect them. How willingly the village leaders let Orochimaru watch the exams. Sasuke's entire involvement in them. *Good luck on your exams*: Orochimaru had known, not from spies, but from the village leaders themselves that Sasuke was going to be participating. The desperation to make sure Sasuke didn't drop out of the third test. *Fight smart*.

Not against Naruto.

He spotted them, the Elders. They weren't smiling, but they were watching him closely, the culmination of their plan. To puppeteer him. Give him a secret test. Make him think Naruto was in jeopardy. Test his loyalty. His *loyalty*.

His blade was at both of their throats not a moment later. He surprised even himself with his speed. More surprising was Naruto's.

The only thing that stopped the cold metal from decapitating the both of them in one swipe was Naruto's hand, palm firmly stopping the motion at the hilt. Sasuke's arm shook with rage, exertion, and reluctance. Breathing hard through his nose, Sasuke caught Naruto's eye. The single glance held an entire conversation. Naruto had not stopped him because he thought Sasuke was in the wrong. Sasuke wished that had been the reason. It was harder for him to come to terms with the fact that he was being stopped for his own protection. Naruto had promised that he wouldn't let Sasuke walk alone again, and the choice he had been about to make would have rendered that inevitable.

He had caused quite the disturbance. The audience was finally panicking like they should have been. Weapons were drawn, all pointing his direction. Sasuke had all five Kage and their most trusted bodyguards confronting him. The entire arena went still. Sasuke looked into the eyes of the Elders, the two living people most responsible for every hardship in his life. They were infuriatingly calm despite his blade at their throats.

"It was a test," Sasuke stated like a demand for answers.

Their eyes were cold. "Yes," Homura said.

"Sasuke, it was just-" he whipped his body around, the tip of his sword now at Kakashi's throat. The movement sparked action from the others, but Sasuke was surrounded by his ribcage, impenetrable to Gaara's sand, the glow of it masking the shadow Shikamaru had attempted to imprison him with. The scene froze again.

Kakashi. The Hokage. Sasuke had warned him, hadn't he? To not try to use Naruto as a way to control him again. And here it was, the most blatant manipulation. Sasuke had warned him. He should do away with him, right now. Sasuke had given him many chances to stop toying with him. But he kept doing it, feigning righteousness the whole way. And to bring Naruto into it? Sasuke should kill him here and stop that from ever happening again.

Why were there tears clouding his vision?

Kakashi stepped forward, letting the point of Sasuke's katana jab into his clavicle. He had no guard up. "I'm sorry, Sasuke." The apology did nothing but enrage him. Kakashi had his eyes closed, and Sasuke was too upset to yell, too afraid of the tears threatening to fall down his cheeks. "I tried to talk them out of it-"

"It was *your* decision," Sasuke found his voice, deep and guttural. "*You're* the Hokage."

"Yes."

He should do it. He had every right to.

Sasuke dropped his blade, and then Naruto's hand was on his shoulder; he had once again been able to bypass the Susanoo. He had waited for Sasuke to make his decision before doing it. Sasuke took in the warmth of it. Calming. Safe. But Sasuke wasn't safe; he never truly had

been, all his life. Not when he was a child, damned to a life of oppression with his clan. When he was abandoned after the massacre. Even now, watched, scrutinized. Not trusted. So be it.

Furiously, Sasuke turned his back on his old teacher, addressing the Elders again. He had his blade down, but his fist was clenched around the hilt at the ready for a moment's notice. Raising his voice, Sasuke cornered them. "You've spent years of your life manipulating me. You kill my clan. You convince the world it was all my brother's doing. Make him lead me to be his murderer. You uphold the falsities of the Second Hokage, spread his mistruth about the Curse of Hatred to make everyone believe it was all the Uchiha's own fault- that we were some barbaric breed of human responsible for our own demise. And then you decide to test if I'm *loyal* to you. Here's my answer:"

He could feel the entire arena hanging on his word. Let them listen. Let the world hear his promise.

"I'm not. I will kill you if I have to. If you continue to lie and manipulate for power. In your death, I will personally wash your hands clean of the blood of my people you have slaughtered. If you live an honest life, you should not be scared of me. And should you attempt to use my bonds against me again," he clenched his teeth tight for a moment, his anger emanating from every pore in his body, "I will protect both him and myself from the fate of your cruelty by any means necessary. I let you live now because sooner than later, you will die. You best pray it not be at my hand."

And then he did what he does best: he left. He could hear Sakura screaming his name as he disappeared into the portal.

_o-O-o_

Chapter End Notes

...sorry for making the ostrich episode canon

20

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: Sasuke experiences some dark thoughts for a brief stint in this chapter. If you are sensitive to suicidal thoughts, please do not subject yourself to reading a few of these paragraphs. I indicated where it starts with three dashes (---) and an indentation. You can continue reading again a few paragraphs down at the next three dashes and indentation.

Whether you need it now, in the future, or not at all, the Trevor Project offers a free hotline for anyone struggling with dark thoughts. Centered and founded in protecting queer teens, their 24/7 hotline is a safe space if you are feeling like you need help. Call or text, 1-866-488-7386.

_o-O-o_

A moment later, his knees were in the snow, the endless blizzard raging around him. He expended too much chakra; both of his eyes had a steady stream of blood raining down his cheeks. He had to press on them with his hand and breathe through the pain. His adrenaline stayed in the Real Dimension, leaving him to deal with the full brunt of his injuries. It was a bad enough pain that his stomach churned, and then he released its contents onto the white powder. The cold numbed his body.

One shoulder remained tangible past the numbness. A warmth, a bit of pressure. Naruto's hand. Had he brought Naruto with him to this awful place? Right. He had. Naruto had been holding his shoulder. That would explain why traversing the portal had left him so powerless.

"Sasuke?" Naruto was quiet, kneeling down in the snow next to him.

Even talking was painful. "Naruto," he rasped. "I shouldn't have brought you here."

Naruto's only response was to pull him in, and then Sasuke's face was in the crook of his neck, seeping him of his warmth. This was a hug. Sasuke realized in the moment how, despite all they had done together, they had never actually done this. How many times had Naruto put an arm around his shoulder? How many Friday nights did they press their bodies together to find sleep? How many times did their lips connect, electricity binding them? For all of that, Sasuke could not for the life of him remember another time like this. It was different in bed, when they were simply finding their rest. In the bath in Suna, perhaps, was the closest they had gotten to this. Even with all of the kissing, they had not connected like this. The kissing had a motive. This did not.

Sasuke couldn't help succumbing. He had been touch-starved for too long. Naruto had it worse, he knew. Longer. Remembering this, he wrapped his arm tightly around Naruto's middle, trying to bring him in impossibly closer. The blizzard around them raged, but Naruto was warm. Sasuke couldn't move anymore, whether it was from the cold or the overexertion of his body. Or of his mind. Naruto was seeping his energy into him, and Sasuke greedily seized every bit of it given to him.

Eventually Naruto lifted his head from where it had been resting, half on Sasuke's and half on Sasuke's shoulder. "Let's find shelter," he instructed.

"I have to send you back," Sasuke insisted. The way he held tighter as he said it contradicted his words.

"Later," Naruto said, but Sasuke didn't believe him. "You should rest more." Perhaps that would be the smartest move. Naruto had healed him, but it wasn't enough to create another portal. Naruto had to pull back further to look around at their location. "Where should we go?"

Everything around them was mounds of snow, or falling snow, or snow flying sideways. Just snow. But Sasuke knew where they were; he always entered this dimension at this spot. He attempted to stand, and Naruto's hands were already on him to assist. "This way," he nodded.

They entered the small cave Sasuke had made his respite whenever he travelled here. It was barely a few square meters wide, but it blocked the wind and snow, and with a fire it actually retained its heat. He had gathered logs to burn from the Real Dimension during one of his previous visits, as it didn't seem like any trees grew naturally here.

Naruto spotted the firewood after he helped Sasuke sit against the stone wall. "Did you put these here?" he asked, already grabbing a couple and placing them in the center of the cave. Sasuke grunted his response. With a few quick hand signs, they had a fire. Naruto came to sit next to him, almost too close.

Sasuke was thankful for it. He rested his head on Naruto's shoulder, and together they watch the fire flicker. Its soft crackling was the only noise over the howling wind.

He supposed he was feeling better. His body must be warm with the fire so close, though he could hardly register it. And he was no longer struggling without chakra, thanks to Naruto. His eyes were still stabbing sharp pains into his skull. It was the only pain he could feel. He wondered if the cold was still affecting him despite the fire. He knew it wasn't. The pain in his eyes. The body next to him. Those were his tethers.

"I can feel it," Naruto said into the quiet.

Sasuke considered him for a moment, but did not lift his cheek from his shoulder. "Feel what?"

"Because I linked our chakras. I felt your anger," he explained, and Sasuke only blinked his surprise. "And right now I feel your sadness. I could also feel…" he mumbled here, trailing off in a way Sasuke couldn't understand. "You know, when we were kids, I always thought

you didn't care about anything. You were always so standoffish. I learned that I was wrong, of course, but this- feeling even just a fragment of what you do-" he cut himself off. "I guess it makes sense, why you are the way you are. You feel things harder than everyone else. *No one* would be able to handle it."

Does he? He didn't feel anything now, besides Naruto and his eyes.

"What they did to you was messed up." He meant everything: what they did to him in his childhood, in his teenage years, and today. "Those old people were one thing, but for Kakashi to go along with it…"

"Kakashi still doesn't trust me."

"What? No, he had to have-"

"You didn't trust me, either."

Silence for another moment. Sasuke hadn't meant to bring it up. He didn't want Naruto to think he wasn't grateful for the amount of trust Naruto *did* give him. "It wasn't a lack of trust," Naruto told him firmly. "I was just afraid Orochimaru was going to get in your head again. And use you."

It was a tactful way to put it, something Naruto didn't have the nuance for. Which meant he really thought of it that way. Sasuke would take it and hold it close to him. "I don't blame Kakashi. He has you to protect, and Sakura."

"But he loves you too," Naruto insisted, his voice louder now. "He wasn't doing it for the same reasons the old geezers were. He was seriously about to let you kill him for it." That was ridiculous; Kakashi had known Sasuke wouldn't be able to do that. Only when Naruto said it, it held more reality. Sasuke was forced to remember the seriousness on Kakashi's face, preserved so perfectly by his Sharingan. Perhaps both statements were true. That he had known Sasuke wouldn't kill him, but also that he would have let him, if he decided to.

Perhaps Kakashi did have a reason. Perhaps he had tried to warn him, *fight smart*, and perhaps he had tried to talk the others out of it. But he still went through with it, whatever his reasons. What made him do it?

Too exhausted to think any more on it, Sasuke let it go. He didn't have it in him to be angry or hurt, anyway. Perhaps he had tried to butter him up this morning with the plans for the memorial to make up for his eventual betrayal. The memorial! Well, farewell to that idea. There was no way the Elders would ever let that pass now. Sasuke had directly threatened to kill them. He would not mention this to Naruto; he didn't think Naruto would be able to come through on that promise anymore, the one to make sure the memorial was built. But it was okay. Sasuke understood, and it was nowhere near Naruto's fault, despite how personally he would take it if he found out it wasn't happening.

Sasuke didn't care anymore, anyway. His clan would continue to be a tarnished memory in the history of the world. It was unjust, but the world had never been just. Not to him, nor to anyone. Humanity was doomed to kill itself, over and over, repeating its mistakes, choosing

to live a false reality to make itself look good. No, Sasuke didn't care anymore. He had other realities he could live in. Distance himself to any other dimension of his choosing.

Naruto was here. That was nice. Reality didn't deserve Naruto, he thought bitterly. But even as he thought it, he knew it was wrong. Naruto didn't deserve this dimension. And this dimension wasn't good enough to have Naruto, either, this cold barren wasteland, nothing but ice and snow. This world was for Sasuke. Naruto deserved to thrive in his warmth, where it could be spread and shared with others'. His birthday was in little over a week. Everyone who loved him was going to be there.

Was Sasuke?

He couldn't figure out his answer. He should stay here, shouldn't he? Naruto would be better off without having to worry about him. The hardships Naruto would never have to take if it weren't for Sasuke. It would be better for him if he let go. He'd be happier if Sasuke wasn't there to put him through it. But he still couldn't answer the question: why couldn't he just isolate himself here? Was it his own selfishness? Naruto was all Sasuke had. Without him, loneliness.

His choice to free the Kage had been in part due to the fear of that loneliness. Why was he so afraid of loneliness, now? Had he not strived for it for years? What had happed in this past twelve months that made him so *dependent*? Loneliness wasn't so bad. He'd be numb from the pain of it again before long. Sasuke had found solace in it before, and he could do so again. It was what was best for him. And for Naruto. Sasuke had truly taken too many luxuries, being so close to him.

It was quiet for a long time. Perhaps over an hour. They watched the flickering of the fire. Sasuke's cheek was as numb as the rest of him, pressed against Naruto's shoulder. A reminder of the numbness to come. He gave himself that time, and that time only.

"I should send you back," he said once he knew he had spent too much time.

Naruto kept quiet for another moment. "We'll go back together." No, they wouldn't. Sasuke should never have brought him here to begin with.

And then, because it had worked in the past, because he was ready to cut his ties, to set Naruto free, he lied. "I'll see you on Friday."

He had never spoken the promise in its entirety aloud before. Cruel of him, to make the only time he'll ever say it be the one time he broke the promise. He pushed thoughts of Itachi aside, his forehead tingling with the ghost of a touch. It was for the best. Naruto would see the apology in it in time, just like he could now for Itachi.

"I'm not going anywhere, Sasuke."

The words knocked against Sasuke's ribcage like a physical weapon. Naruto had been able to see through his lie instantly. Was it because of the bond? Or the merged chakra? No, it was the promise. Naruto had promised him that he would never let Sasuke be alone again. It was

his instinct to keep that vow that had driven him to the knowledge of what Sasuke was trying to do.

Was that why Sasuke had such trouble trying to answer why he couldn't desert Naruto? Because he knew it would never work? Naruto would not let him do that to himself. Even if Sasuke managed to trick him into returning to the Real Dimension, the minute Sasuke left him Naruto would be hunkering down in his resolve to find a way to return to him. Naruto would waste his life bringing him back again. And knowing Naruto, he might actually do it. But how long would it take? And when Naruto finally found him again, Sasuke would have aged twice as much due to the time difference. Might even be gone from old age. He would be taking Naruto's life with him if he were to do that.

--- The only way Sasuke would be able to free Naruto of such a life was in death. That would be the only place Naruto wouldn't be able to reach him. Was that what would be most fair? To die? To release Naruto's burden of him? He would be sad, but not forever. It would be the only way to free him. To abandon him with mercy-

The word floated around in his head for a moment. Abandon.

To do that would be to abandon Naruto. Naruto, who had spent his childhood orphaned by both his parents and the failure of a village. No one had stepped in and given him company. He had to demand it himself, go out and seize it on his own. He fought for every interaction, even negative, so long as it meant he could form a connection with someone. Who the hell was Sasuke to fail him like that?

Could Sasuke really do that? Hadn't Sakura said it today? *He wouldn't be truly happy if you weren't there*. Naruto had fought every battle for him, dug his bare hands through solid stone until his fingernails were cracked and bloody to reach him. In Sasuke's darkest moments, he got down on his hands and knees and begged for him. Naruto had never abandoned him. How shitty of a person would Sasuke be to not give him the same respect in turn?

--- He thought it was blood, at first, that dripped down his eyes over his nose onto Naruto's shoulder. They had been bleeding before, after all. But it wasn't. Naruto must have noticed the wetness, because he snaked his hand around Sasuke's body, under his cloak, pulling him closer. This was why Sasuke could not negatively answer his question. Sasuke was going to be amidst the people who loved Naruto, because Naruto did not deserve the pain Sasuke would bring him if he wasn't.

Naruto wasn't going anywhere, and neither was Sasuke. They were a team. A pair. Never alone, even when apart. Relief flooded him next, and Sasuke gasped for air. The dam of numbness had broken, and Sasuke could actually feel the heat of the fire again. Despite it, he was shaking. Naruto was next to him. Naruto could slip into his Susanoo. Sasuke didn't deserve something so good, and Naruto didn't deserve what Sasuke put him through. But Naruto *did* deserve to have what he wanted, and Sasuke was one of those desires. Facts. Sasuke could deal with facts.

Sasuke loved him. Facts.

Moving his body when it had been motionless for so long was a struggle within itself, but Sasuke forced it. He caught Naruto by the mouth, who seemed to anticipate the kiss. He must have felt Sasuke's emotions return to him. The taste of him, his warmth, the way he smelled- it was all intoxicating. Sasuke needed it, needed more of it. He needed to be closer, so he threw a leg over his lap, straddling him. Naruto's hands went to his hips, keeping him in place, mouthing back at Sasuke with just as much desperation.

It was hot in their cave, the fire overwhelming the small enclosure. Sasuke shucked off his cloak, not letting his lips part Naruto's for a moment. How could he? Sasuke never wanted to part from him again, he realized. How stupid was he, thinking that it was even a possibility? And for what, the sake of the village? Fuck that. If Sasuke remained a thorn in its side for the rest of his life, then he would have done the due diligence of his clan. Live a life of misery away from Naruto? What a stupid concept.

He had his hand down Naruto's front. He wouldn't let him get away, not for anyone. Naruto gasped when Sasuke's fist wrapped around him. He hadn't given him much warning, and he still sometimes got overwhelmed by Sasuke when they were like this. "Sas-…" he choked out at the first few strokes, his body shaking. Sasuke dropped his kisses lower, down the column of Naruto's throat, to let him breathe. But he did not ease up his hand. Naruto was hardening under him at an impossibly quick pace, which was good, because Sasuke needed him. "Sasuke, you-"

Sasuke kissed him again, silencing him. He couldn't fathom a conversation right now, especially one of those babbling nonsensical ones. Naruto's jacket was still zipped up, which was frustrating because Sasuke couldn't unzip it without pausing his work. It was annoying, but Sasuke had to let it be. As for his pants, though, it was easier to unzip those and free Naruto from the fabric, which was more important than his jacket anyway.

At some point during the kiss Sasuke had activated his Mangekyou, because when he opened his eyes to look down at his hand it was in sharp detail. He sped up his movement, faster than he had ever done before. Naruto's body keened into itself at the sensation, and Sasuke watched his eyes screw shut.

He still wasn't close enough. He needed to be closer to Naruto. Watching him writhe at Sasuke's hand was satisfying, but he needed more. Sasuke wasn't so prude. He knew what came next for them. Tongue running over his bottom lip, Sasuke set his goal.

He brought his face down level with where his hand was working Naruto over. He had never been this close before, close enough to watch the skin slide over the hard muscle, the large vein spidering out along the length. Closer, he thought. He came inward, dropping his jaw open.

"Sasuke!" Naruto had jerked upward, his hand shoving against Sasuke's shoulder. His pupils were blown wider than Sasuke had ever seen them, so that it was harder to see the slit in the irises Sasuke knew to look for. The marks on his cheek were thick. The firelight flickered softly on Naruto's skin. Naruto had stopped him from doing what he was about to do.

Okay. Not that then. He surged upward again, pressing their lips together. Not that. But Sasuke still needed to be closer, couldn't focus on anything but doing so. "Naruto," he

pleaded against his mouth, hardly pulling back. He fell back to the plague of that memory from the previous week. “Your fingers.”

It took him a moment to register the words. “My-?”

Sasuke was in his lap again, Naruto having been left out of his pants, so he grinded his hips down onto what was exposed of him. “Naruto,” he begged again, longing for that sensation, of having Naruto so close, physically inside his body.

“We don’t have anything with us. It’ll hurt,” he reasoned.

“I don’t care,” Sasuke growled, because he wanted it. He wanted to feel Naruto.

“I do.”

Sasuke stopped.

“I don’t want to hurt you. And I-I feel like I’m taking advantage of you, right now.”

Taking advantage of him? What did he mean? Sasuke had been the one to initiate all of this. If anything, Sasuke was being the forceful one. He pulled back slightly, furrowing his brows, trying to understand the meaning somewhere in Naruto’s eyes. Then Naruto raised both of his hands, cupping Sasuke’s face. His thumbs gave a quick swipe over Sasuke’s cheeks.

They were wet. Sasuke was still crying. “We can slow down. We don’t have to go so fast.” Slow down? Did he not realize how close Sasuke had been to abandoning him? How could he slow down right now; he needed reassurance, he needed to know Naruto was *there*. He needed Naruto closer, needed more of him, he needed to make up for all of the lost time, for the years of neglect, for every moment wasted. How could they go slow when there was so much time to make up?

Naruto showed him.

He laid out the cloak onto the hard rock under them, guiding Sasuke onto it. He worried for a moment at having not done the same for Naruto, moments before, grinding him down into the cold jagged floor. But Naruto didn’t seem fussed about that rudeness. He guided Sasuke into place, planting slow leisurely kisses to that spot on his neck, the one Naruto had been intuitive enough to find so quickly on him the first time they had done this.

Sasuke became pliant to Naruto’s every guide. He let Naruto position him, sat back while he worked Sasuke’s clothes off of his body. Naruto’s kiss moved to his chest, which was now bare. It had become incredibly hot in their cave between the fire and their antics. Sasuke was sweaty, and he had not been cleaned of his battle from earlier, but Naruto didn’t care. He licked down Sasuke’s clavicle, his sternum, his right thumb tapping against Sasuke’s left nipple. When Sasuke reacted to a specific spot, he spent more of their precious time on it. His tongue found Sasuke’s right nipple after the jerk he gave to Naruto’s thumb.

It was the most bizarre feeling, especially when he started sucking. After a moment, Naruto looked up at him, grinning. “You’re blushing.”

“It’s weird,” Sasuke defended himself.

Naruto took a detour upward to kiss the corner of Sasuke’s mouth, commenting as he pulled back, “Not if it feels good.” Whatever. Naruto was back down at his abdomen again, finding a different spot to pay attention to.

There were some spots that were unbearable, and Naruto teased him by chasing him when he squirmed. Never too much, though. He always found another new spot. When his tongue dipped into Sasuke’s belly button, Sasuke had to say, “Now *that’s* weird.”

Chin resting against Sasuke’s lower stomach, Naruto grinned at him. “You’re surprisingly ticklish.”

“Shut up.”

It was an echo of who they were together, and Sasuke’s heart gave a pang. Naruto was right. They were closer to each other this way, taking the time to explore. Their precious time was better spent with some semblance of control, displaying the truth of their bond. For a moment, they looked at each other. They both knew what came after this, where Naruto’s lips had yet to venture. Naruto only had so much of Sasuke’s skin to explore.

Thumbs rubbing at the divots of Sasuke’s hips, Naruto let out a breath, his tongue poking out to moisten his lower lip. “You okay?” he asked.

It was such a benign question. Naruto could clearly tell how Sasuke was. But he gave him a moment to reassess where they were. That his desperation had cleared. Naruto hadn’t wanted Sasuke to be desperate for closeness. That’s why he stopped him. Desperation meant he was worried the moment would be fleeting; that it would pass and never come back.

Naruto was trying to tell him that they had time. That they had the rest of their lives. In response, Sasuke cupped Naruto’s chin, brushing his cheek with his thumb, mirroring the action Naruto had done earlier to wipe his tears. Sasuke wasn’t crying anymore. Naruto caught his message as well as his hand, flipping the palm upward to place a gentle kiss. Sasuke admired the sweet gesture. “You could have just said yes,” he teased.

Sasuke tugged roughly on Naruto’s earlobe in retaliation.

“Ow, okay!” But he was laughing. And then he was nuzzling his nose into a low point on Sasuke’s stomach, just over the waistband of his pants, and Sasuke clenched his teeth, because the movement jostled the fabric over him. His hand moved into the blond spikes as Naruto began to undo him, shimmying his pants over his hips just far enough.

Naruto’s breath over him was hot, and so was his hand, which had grabbed him by the base around his balls. Sasuke only then thought that perhaps he should have prepared himself more for this. He had no idea what to expect about how it would feel, Naruto’s mouth-

Soft and warm and wet. But so much more than that. Those were just words, and this was an entire concept. Sasuke bucked into the sensation, but Naruto caught him and forced him down. All Naruto had taken was the head, so far, and it was already overwhelming. He

thought he knew Naruto's mouth. They had kissed so much, why would Sasuke think there was still more of it he didn't know about? But when Naruto went lower, took in more of him, Sasuke had to concede that he had been woefully ignorant.

He could barely open his eyes, which he *badly* needed to, to capture the sight of Naruto around him. The quick glance he managed was more than he could bear. How could he look at that without losing himself completely? But it didn't matter that the glance was quick, because Sasuke had captured it with his Mangekyou, and the image was burned into his memory. Mouth stretched wide, eyebrows furrowed, eyelashes delicately fanned out over his cheeks.

Breath caught in a hitch, Sasuke's fist clutched onto the cloak shielding him from the cold stone beneath them. Naruto's tongue swirled, its slippery heat eliciting shockwaves of pleasure. He couldn't help the noises escaping him. He should probably have been embarrassed by them, but he could hardly register a single thought let alone something so complex as self-reflection. They were alone, anyway. They had a whole dimension to themselves. Naruto's head was bobbing up and down over him in a continual motion.

Heartbeat racing, Sasuke came, his body seizing with the over-stimulation. He couldn't even open his eyes for the aftershocks of it, Naruto suckling at him softly while his whole body twitched. Disoriented, Sasuke zoned out, his mind vacating him. Eventually, he registered Naruto's body first as it slowly moved up. Naruto buried his face into Sasuke's chest, both arms wrapping around his torso while he rested his entire bodyweight onto him.

Sasuke thought he might be crying again. He heard himself breathing heavily, and could feel his own chest thumping under Naruto's ear. Naruto on top of him, covering his whole body, holding onto him as though afraid Sasuke might disappear. Dumb of him. Sasuke couldn't move if he wanted to. He thought that he should probably try to return the favor, but he knew Naruto wouldn't let him even if it was possible.

His body was spent. The exertion, the emotion, the pleasure. And Naruto didn't seem to want to move either.

_o-O-o_

Sasuke had never slept so well with his back against solid stone before. It shouldn't have been comfortable at all, and it wasn't, really, but Naruto's weight on top of him certainly was. He woke up after an indeterminable amount of time and simply stayed there, letting Naruto finish out the rest of his sleep. It was impossible to know how much time had passed, as it never seemed to turn to nighttime in this dimension. He had a watch in his cloak, but he would need to move Naruto to fumble around in the fabric under them to find it. And he didn't know what time they had fallen asleep, anyway. All he could tell was that it had been long enough for the fire to go out.

Eventually Naruto woke up, but he seemed just as content to lay there as Sasuke was. Without the fire, it was getting cold again in their little cave. The first thing spoken, after nearly an hour of silence even though they were both aware of the other's consciousness, was Naruto lamenting that he should get up and make another one. Sasuke wordlessly pulled a

few logs into place with the tug of his Rinnegan, then carefully sent a few balls of fire at them until they caught. There was no need for them to move, anymore.

They kept quiet for a bit more after that, snoozing, but otherwise just existing together, before Naruto began to talk. And talk. And talk some more.

He had a lot of stories from his time with Jiraiya, travelling to different countries. He had tales of numerous stupid D missions he had been sent on. Sasuke had to hand it to him for being able to remember so many different people, no matter how inconsequential they were to the plot of the story. There were some ridiculous encounters that Sasuke couldn't help smiling at, especially not when Naruto explained them with such enthusiasm.

He talked non-stop for what had to have been hours. On paper, he would not sound like a great storyteller to most people, but Sasuke found that he was an amusing one, at the very least. He jumped from topic to topic as though at random, interrupting himself mid-tale to go off on a completely unrelated tangent, and forgetting to return to the original until Sasuke prodded him to circle back. Other people might have found it exhausting to try to keep up with him, but Sasuke enjoyed the game he had with himself trying to decipher how each particularly outlandish deviation connected in Naruto's mind.

Sasuke was indefinitely grateful for the distraction. Listening to Naruto in this way was enjoyable.

Enough time passed that even Naruto started to fizzle out of stories, though. Some hours later, he looked up at Sasuke, chin resting on his chest, and instead implored Sasuke to speak. "Can you tell me about your friends? Taka?"

Sasuke blinked back in surprise at suddenly being thrown into the limelight. He had been content with taking the passive role in the conversation. He couldn't tell where this particular tangent had stemmed from out of the previous discussion. "What about them?"

"Well, I mean, I don't know too much about them. There's the big guy, the water dude, and that girl who's super loud and obsessed with you," Naruto described, not being intentionally unkind. "You chose to team with them, right? They're your friends?"

It wasn't precisely untrue, but Sasuke had never defined Taka with such a word like 'friends'. He had especially not been attempting such romantics at the time of gathering them. "I don't know. I just needed them to help me."

"Oh," Naruto said. Then he continued, "I ran into them before our match."

That threw Sasuke for a loop. "Did you?"

"Yeah. I remembered the girl, because we carried her back to the village for interrogation once." After Sasuke nearly killed her. Yeah. Naruto bypassed that. "And she remembered me. The three of them seemed pretty close, the way they were picking on each other. And then they started making fun of you, but like, in the friend way, you know? Like, I could tell that they were doing it because they like you." Was that so? Sasuke never put too much thought into it. Suigetsu and Karin bickered constantly, and Suigetsu loved to make fun of Sasuke to

rile her up. Jugo was always quietly laughing, but occasionally he had a one-liner to add to their squabbling that outshone the others' jokes by miles. Perhaps if they all did actually hate each other like they always said they did, they would not have stuck around together this long after the war. "And then they started making fun of me for some reason, which got me mad, but thinking back, I think that was just their backwards way of showing that they liked me? Or like, approved of me or something? Because like, that's what they did to each other, and to you. I don't know, it was kind of confusing."

Sasuke pondered this for a moment. Perhaps that bunch *did* make fun of others as a way of showing fondness. "I don't know. They're okay, I guess. Kind of annoying."

Naruto pursed his lips, "So you really just chose them based on their powers?"

"I-" he stopped himself from agreeing to it. He would have said so quite easily if asked by anyone else, but with Naruto he had to reconsider. Was it true that he picked Taka based on their powers alone? He needed them, and they were all indeed strong. But if he was making that the only criteria, there were a number of other ninja he should have recruited instead. Stronger healers, better fighters. Why did he choose them? "No, I didn't," he answered Naruto's question. "They each showed something about them that I liked. That's why I picked them."

With one raised eyebrow, Naruto egged him, "Like what?"

Of course Naruto wouldn't let him leave it at that. "Jugo was the originator of the curse mark, so he always had my attention. The first time I met him, Orochimaru had used him to display to me the power of his nature energy. He killed ten people. Later that night, I heard him crying in his cell over it. He's a gentle person." He had never told anyone about that before; not even Jugo knew that Sasuke had witnessed his emotions on that night. "Suigetsu I had met many times. He used to insult Orochimaru to his face and threatened to kill him every time they were in the room together. It was admirable. And Karin had been one of the only people I know who had truly conned Orochimaru. She started as a test-subject herself, but somehow convinced him to let her be in charge of research, even going so far as being appointed as a warden over his largest holding center. Often times she omitted a good portion of her research from entering Orochimaru's files."

With a smirk, Naruto goaded, "You chose them because they all hated Orochimaru?"

"It's a good quality to have," Sasuke shrugged. Naruto chuckled, but Sasuke sobered. That wasn't all of it, which Naruto surely knew. Sasuke had never considered that he had formed Taka based on such arbitrary concepts as whether he liked them as people or not. But it had to have been true.

Just then, Naruto slid his hands under Sasuke's body, right at the small of his back, and dug his face into Sasuke's chest. He wiggled his nose into Sasuke's sternum, mumbling almost incoherently, "I'm glad you were able to find friends."

Uncomfortable, Sasuke frowned. "I'm not sure if I'd call them friends."

“Sure they are,” Naruto insisted firmly, face still hidden against Sasuke’s skin. “You like them, right? And they like you. You’re friends.” So simply put.

“I guess. If that’s really all it takes to be friends with someone,” Sasuke replied flatly.

Pulling his head up to show Sasuke his wide grin, Naruto assured him, “It is!” Well, Naruto was the expert at friendship, after all. But the only friendships Sasuke had grown up with were so much more complex than that. Kakashi, Sakura. Layers upon layers of complication, there. And his strongest bond, the one laying on top of him, felt like the most complicated of them all.

Naruto’s hands, both wrapped all of the way around Sasuke’s middle, squeezed slightly at his sides. Sasuke flinched a little at the sensation. Naruto only held him tighter, which was worse.

“I can’t believe how ticklish you are!” Naruto commented brightly, eyes squinting shut as he smiled.

“Don’t even think about it,” Sasuke warned him.

Just as Naruto’s fingers danced on him, Sasuke found a kunai in Naruto’s own hip pack and had it positioned under his throat in the next instant. Naruto froze, the metal brushing against his jugular. “Y-You know, that really ruins the mood we had going for us,” he stuttered.

Clicking his tongue, Sasuke set the knife down. “It’s your own fault.”

Frowning for a moment, Naruto considered him. He moved up higher, the alignment of their bodies shifting against each other in the movement. Sasuke’s breath caught when Naruto’s lips brushed against the skin under his ear. “It’s okay to be sensitive, you know?”

Sasuke’s whole being shuddered, and he let himself be kissed in that spot again. Frankly, he had been quite surprised at how long they had managed to not touch each other in this way after waking up. They had been so close for hours of consciousness, close enough that the boundaries of their outlines had begun to blur. But it had remained innocent throughout it. They had been simply resting together, finding comfort in one another.

The next multiple hours were spent in various states of togetherness, exploring each other’s bodies, probing each other’s minds. After about their collective third orgasm, Sasuke brought upon the fourth out of Naruto, finally able to repay his service from before. Naruto, like the majority of other traits about him, had an intoxicating taste. He guided Sasuke through the motions, babbling in that incredibly amusing way he so often did when he was being pleasured. Sasuke had blushed to concerning levels to learn the details of how Naruto became so skilled with his mouth. But Naruto blathered on about his Shadow Clones anyway, oblivious to the way Sasuke’s heart raced at the idea. It was hard to not think about it when Naruto kept on describing it in such detail.

When they became too spent to even talk to each other, they slept again. After waking, Sasuke’s body felt raw, but so, so tranquil. He wouldn’t have been opposed to starting

another round, but Naruto was still sleeping. Their fire had gone out again, so Sasuke wordlessly relit it as he had done before.

Sasuke really had no sense of how much time had passed. The sun, always in the sky in this dimension, gave him little assistance. From the waking hours that had gone by, Sasuke surmised at least twelve hours, but how long had they spent sleeping? A wrestling of nerves in his stomach reminded him that he could not keep Naruto here for much longer. But however desolate and inhabitable this dimension was, he and Naruto had all of it to themselves.

They weren't an Uchiha and the Kyuubi here. Hell, they were barely even Naruto and Sasuke. There was no one here to ogle them, abuse them, manipulate them. They were just two bodies finding comfort in each other. The recluse of it was something Sasuke hadn't realized he longed for. Naruto was *his* here. He didn't have to share him.

When Naruto awoke again, Sasuke was forced to break his delusional bubble. Naruto's stomach growled. If it had been at least twelve waking hours since they had come here, then dinner time had long since passed. This world did not have ample food. There was a large body of water about an hour's journey where strange looking fish resided under about six feet of solid ice, but Sasuke had not determined whether they were poisonous or not. When he spent his time over here, or in any of the dimensions, Sasuke always had to stock up in the Real Dimension first. He had not brought anything with him to their match.

By the way Naruto tried to laugh it off, Sasuke could tell Naruto had been aware of this problem for a while. He had food pills in his pack, but Sasuke stopped him from eating them. They would need to go back into the Real Dimension.

Sasuke warped them back to a secluded section of wood some two hours outside of Konoha's walls. It was an area he frequently resided in, as it was for some reason the easiest spot in the Real Dimension to portal back to. It had a rushing waterfall into a bubbling creek that hid a cave behind it, which had a barely noticeable entrance that could be accessed without getting into the water. Many times Sasuke had spent a day or two here. He wasn't sure if Naruto had expected to be back in the village or not, but by the way he excitedly admired the picturesque view, he didn't seem disappointed. This place was ample with food: fish in the creek, forest animals roaming freely, even several patches of edible wild berries at the edge of the clearing.

It was dark. Sasuke finally checked the watch he had in his cloak. They had spent over 24 hours in the Blizzard Dimension. It was the middle of the night in the Real Dimension, but he couldn't determine what hour. With Konoha so close, they could replenish their bellies and then probably make it to the village for sunrise. But they didn't.

They spent the week.

_o-O-o_

21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_o-O-o_

For all Sasuke expected living in the woods with Naruto to be, it was so much better. He had expected he'd get irritable with him eventually, as Naruto was incredibly annoying, but he didn't. While he certainly was annoying, Sasuke genuinely enjoyed his company, and Naruto seemed to know when he really needed to back off and leave Sasuke in peace. He thought perhaps Naruto would get bored living here like this with no one but Sasuke as company, but he appeared quite content. He had assumed Naruto was too extraverted to be able to live an isolated life in the woods. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Sasuke had never realized how comforting it was to have someone around.

They found plenty of things to do. They trained in the mornings, fine-tuning their chakra control. In the evenings they sparred with taijutsu alone. But it was the afternoons that Sasuke enjoyed the most. The pool of water under the waterfall was cold with it being mid-October, but it was bearable, and Naruto managed to pull him in on one day. Another afternoon they made a competition of collecting berries, which Sasuke won but Naruto vehemently disagreed because he had found a greater variety, which in is mind overshadowed the fact that Sasuke had secured more fruit in weight. They did these insubstantial things, finding games and amusement in pointless competitions and activities.

They had ample time to explore each other's bodies, which they did plenty, but not as often as Sasuke might have thought they would. There were more important things to do, somehow, like find out who could throw berries the highest in the air and still catch them in their mouths.

Many hours were spent perfecting their new jutsu and coming up with a name for it. Everything Naruto had come up with at first was downright embarrassing to say, and Sasuke refused them. But then on one evening Naruto whispered lowly, "Kizuna Hikari." Bonded light. It settled warmly in Sasuke's chest, so he agreed on it.

Sasuke hadn't forgotten once about Monday. This little slice of… whatever-it-was, whatever they were doing here- it had a time limit. Naruto's birthday was going to come, and all of his friends, the ostensibly infinite number of them, were throwing him a party back in the village. Sasuke wasn't going to keep him from it, no matter how much he didn't want their time at this waterfall to end.

He decided to end it on Friday morning. It seemed appropriate.

When he brought up that they should head back to the village in the afternoon, Naruto had done nothing but blink at him several times. "You want to?" he asked, and no, Sasuke didn't want to, but the way Naruto had radiated warmth at the idea left him no choice. He nodded.

They took their time cleaning up the area. Somehow their belongings ended up all over: shuriken lodged in distant trees, the bandage they had used as a finish line for a race still on the ground on the other side of the water, the empty basket that they had kept the berries in near the bush. Their area looked lived in. The realization of it gave Sasuke the urge to pull Naruto back into him, which he did, but the act soon became nothing but a stall to their departure.

The journey back went far too quickly. They arrived in Konoha in the early evening, the sun still a bit off from setting, but giving everything a golden glow. Naruto led him to the front door of his apartment, which was so weird to do after months of entering through the window and patio.

A wave of familiar scent hit Sasuke's nose upon entering the apartment. It was how Naruto's home always smelled. Comforting and warm, just like Naruto. As Sasuke removed his cloak, Naruto exclaimed from the entrance of the bedroom, both arms high up in the air in delight, "Teme-chan!"

Sasuke peeked around into the room to see Naruto running over to the cat, which had fluffed up its little black body in fright at the sudden noise. Sasuke's eyes went right to the window, which was wide open. "You left your window open again!?" he scolded.

Naruto picked the cat up, hugging it in a way Sasuke knew it did not enjoy. "So that Teme-chan could come in!"

Trying to keep from seething, Sasuke attested that Naruto had not known he would be away for a week when he left the room the morning of the final exam. Even so, to leave a window wide open when he knew he was going to be gone for hours… "You know they invented cat doors, right?" he advised in a calculatedly even voice that did not mask his annoyance well.

Sasuke was surprised the cat hadn't scratched Naruto across the face yet, with the way Naruto was cradling it like an infant. Its ears were back and its tail was going, so it should only have been a matter of time. "I guess I could put one on the patio door," Naruto mused. The cat squirmed its way out of Naruto's hold, surprisingly not digging its claws into his flesh on the way. Naruto let it go, blinking over at one of his potted plants. "Oh good, Ino watered them," he said as he picked up a sticky note that was stuck to the pot.

At this, Sasuke furrowed his brow. "Ino watered them?"

"My plants," Naruto explained. Sasuke could see the sticky note, which was labeled with a date- today's date- and Ino's signature flourished with a small heart. "I gave her a key to my apartment so that she could water my plants when I go on missions and things."

The selfishness of Sasuke's actions weighed down on him. He had plucked Naruto right out of his life, leaving plants un-watered, a cat abandoned, and friends cut off. The milk in his fridge had probably spoiled. Sasuke tried to swallow down the lump in his throat. Of course, Sasuke had not meant to do such a thing. He had not planned for Naruto to have ended up leaving with him. But still, whether subconsciously or otherwise, his body had acted on instinct to escape with him as far away as they could conceivably go, plucking him right out of the middle of his life.

Naruto's apartment was filled with an abundance of plants that Sasuke had noticed a while ago, but never made sense of. But they, too, were just another factor of his life grown out of a childhood of abandonment, weren't they? The need for another living creature to be dependent on him. That was why he loved that damn cat so much. Why he clung to every iota of friendship. Sasuke could not drag Naruto away from all of this to live a life of seclusion in the woods with him.

No, all of this meant Sasuke would have to come to Konoha to be with him. Who cared what anyone else thought, anyway? He'd be the thorn in the village's side, returning every week- or hell, every day- to be able to keep his bond with Naruto. Screw them all. Naruto was happy in Konoha, with his friends and his plants and his cat. Naruto was happy with Sasuke. Sasuke would not make him choose.

It didn't matter if the village tried to exile him over his stint last week. No one alive could stop him from breeching the walls- besides Naruto, who would never want to do such a thing. But it would be much easier without that kind of complication. "I need to go see Kakashi," Sasuke announced, disregarding the fact that it probably came from out of nowhere to Naruto.

A small, sad smile lifted Naruto's lips. "I do too."

With a curt nod from Sasuke, they donned their outerwear again and left for the Hokage's office. Sasuke would have fancied his usual method of entering the building through a window, but Naruto insisted they use the doors. The guards stationed outside of the building were viscerally confused as to what to do with them, flitting between attack stances and scratching their heads. Naruto clicked his tongue, "Just let us through. We're not going to attack anyone, and Kakashi is *our* sensei."

Everyone they passed inside the building did not hide the fact that they were gawking, jaws hitting the floor at the sight of them. At least until they reached Shikamaru a few paces outside of the office, who only gave a heavy sigh over a sluggish drawl, "He's inside," at the sight of them.

Kakashi wasn't the only one in the office; Sakura was there as well. The two of them were working over a piece of paper quite intensely. They both looked up at the sound of the door, and the moment grew tense.

Kakashi broke it with an almost flippant, "If you're here to kill me, *do* make it quick."

The others seemed to be waiting for Sasuke to be the one to respond. He tried to unclench his teeth.

"I can't," he admitted.

He watched Kakashi's shoulders drop, just barely. As unaffected as he acted outwardly, Sasuke could tell he was relieved. The relief hit Sakura as well, who rushed over to pull both Naruto and him into a crushing hug, all three of their bodies coming together. With her strength, 'crushing' was a literal term. Naruto stuttered, "S-Sakura- you- ah- too tight-!" and Sasuke had to agree, even though he wasn't going to let his pain be heard in such a pitiful

tone. Sasuke had put Sakura through a lot, as well, so if this was something she needed to do, then he was in no place to stop her.

She let go, but still had her grip on their sleeves. Her soft green eyes found Sasuke's. "Are you okay?"

"We were until you cracked our ribs!" Naruto complained.

Smacking him over the head, Sakura nagged, "Be more sensitive to the moment!"

Noisy as they were, Sasuke turned his focus to Kakashi, who had a nervous undertone to his relief. He stepped away from Sakura's hold, situating himself right in front of the Hokage's desk. Behind Sasuke, Naruto and Sakura went quiet. The conversation inevitable, Kakashi nodded to himself. "You want to know why," he stated. "I don't-"

"I think I already know," Sasuke interrupted, catching Kakashi off guard. He had had a week to think about this. "You didn't know if you were included in the list of people I would have to annihilate for peace." By the way Kakashi's eyelids delicately fell shut, Sasuke knew he was right. He could feel Naruto wanting to burst out with some type of denial for him, or more likely to try to wrongly insist that Sasuke didn't include their old teacher on such a list. But Naruto must have sensed that either of those outbursts would have been incorrect. Kakashi had wanted to test him, not because he wasn't sure if Sasuke would break war against Konoha, but because he wasn't sure if Sasuke would break war against *him*. "I don't blame you. I have threatened your life in the past."

Urgently, Kakashi spoke for himself, disregarding Sasuke's last point, "I can't deny that completely, but I wouldn't have done it if I thought there was a chance you would actually attempt to overthrow us." Out of the corner of his eye, Sasuke carefully observed Naruto. When he found Kakashi again, he was being given a piercing, knowing look. Kakashi knew Sasuke was loyal to Naruto and would not have betrayed him. Held deeper in those eyes was more knowledge about it than Sasuke had been prepared to confront, but it was certainly there. Sasuke swallowed the rush of anxiety it brought him down. Kakashi must have known for a while.

"And you regretted it before it even happened," Sasuke supplied him. "'*Fight smart'*."

Rubbing at the back of his neck, Kakashi laughed uneasily. "I was hoping you'd figure it out on your own before Orochimaru even turned up."

"Wait-!" Naruto interjected, disrupting their flow. "If you didn't want to go through with it, why didn't you stop it before it happened?! Why did you have to put Sasuke through that?!"

Yes, why didn't he? Sasuke had his guesses, mainly that Kakashi's guilt had not surpassed his distrust at that point. He waited for Kakashi's response, watching his shoulders tense. He angled his face away, his chin pointing almost backwards toward the paperwork on his desk. "It was the only way to get the plans to pass."

The plans? The paperwork on the Hokage's desk came into clearer focus. The museum. The memorial to Sasuke's clan. Kakashi had Sasuke look over those plans before the match. He

must have known that Sasuke was going to disappear that afternoon, and sought Sasuke's opinions on it before it happened and he became unreachable for what could have been months, if not years. Going through with the test was the only way he could get them to pass. He was keeping true to his promise. "They gave you an ultimatum," Sasuke said aloud as he realized it.

"Yes," he admitted strongly. "The Elders had reservations about building a memorial to a clan that had tried to start an uprising. They told me that you, as the last of the Uchiha, were a danger to upending the very peace they had ensured by your clan's erasure, and pardoning your brother of his crimes would make the village seem feeble and weak. I told them that the village was more feeble and weak feeding into the lie that covered its dirty past. I told them that in honoring your clan and your brother in such a way, you would be less of a danger, and we as an entire village would be able to heal from the atrocities we had committed with it. They said that the only way they would allow it would be if you proved yourself not only docile, but a reliable asset to the village." He gave a shaky breath, continuing, "I was the one who suggested entering you in the Chunin exams, and the one who staged a fake attack that would put you in a position to be tempted to eradicate all world leaders."

Blood boiling, raging inside of him, Sasuke had little left in him to control his anger. Everything he wanted to say got jumbled, and he had to force some bit of restraint to figure it all out. The Elders, always puppeteering their agenda. But Kakashi- he wasn't mad at Kakashi. No, Kakashi had been following the promise he had made. He had said he was going make sure Itachi was pardoned. That he was doing everything he could to make sure the memorial happened. Kakashi knew Sasuke would not attack the village with Naruto at his side. Naruto found words before he could figure out his own, "These old people really piss me off! Who do they think they are, deciding *Sasuke* is the one who needs to be tested on anything? All of this is their fault to begin with!"

"They just don't want to admit that *they're* the villains in the situation," Sakura reasoned correctly.

But Sasuke's anger with the Elders was continual. He had already mulled over every evil attribute they had in them a hundred times over each. Uninterested in that growing, unending list, Sasuke addressed Kakashi again, "Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Would you have gone through with it if I did?"

No, Sasuke wouldn't have. He would have dropped all desire for both the memorial and the pardon at such a request for the Elders' benefit out of pure spite. He would have forced himself to become uninterested in it, detached himself from any heartbreak and pretended like he never wanted the damn thing in the first place. Kakashi knew this, which was why he made sure to keep Sasuke in the dark.

"Wait, so- so-" Naruto was talking again, voice cautiously hopeful. "So you only went through with it because you knew Sasuke wouldn't have attacked the village? Because if you thought he would, then…"

"Yes, Naruto, I was positive that Sasuke would not attack the village if you were there," Kakashi confessed, his opinion on it strong. Sasuke swallowed hard again, but thankfully

Kakashi did not traverse down that dangerous alley any more than that. “But Sasuke was not wrong in his earlier deduction.” He caught Sasuke’s eye like an apology. “There is a part of me that wonders if I would be in danger should there come another day when you see that revolution must come.”

Breathing slowly out of his nose, Sasuke relaxed himself. “I already told you,” he admitted again. “I can’t. I had the opportunity that day to do so, but I couldn’t go through with it.”

“Because you had a reason to not,” Kakashi corrected, barely above a whisper, tactfully not saying Naruto’s name out loud. “But what if there came a day when that reason was not there anymore.”

Even just the thought of it terrified Sasuke to his core. Kakashi was being so delicate in their present company, but Sasuke knew perfectly well what he was trying to say. What if something happened to Naruto, if Naruto was no longer in the picture. How would Sasuke react?

How would his goals of revolution be met were there no Naruto to achieve them peacefully? Would Sasuke even be *able* to fall back into his old mindset? Or would it be *inevitable* for him to do nothing but? Sasuke didn’t have the answer, and he did not want to torture himself with imagining that situation. He and Kakashi were both always so in sync with each other’s psychology. Neither of them knew how that situation would transpire, because Sasuke did not have the mental stability to delve into such a dark chasm to figure it out. Tongue dry, Sasuke forced it to work, “You better make sure nothing ever happens to that reason.”

A humorless chuckle, and Kakashi sighed, “I’ve been trying.”

He had kept Naruto in the village all year.

Oblivious, the subject of their cryptic conversation voiced his confusion, “…What are you guys talking about now?”

“Nothing, Naruto,” Kakashi chimed loudly.

There was too much for Naruto to concern himself with for him to muddle on it. He moved on, “But what now? How are we going to make the old geezers sign off on the museum?”

“Oh, that,” Kakashi pointed with his thumb backwards toward the paperwork on his desk. “You don’t have to worry about that. I’m pushing through with the plans regardless of their approval.”

“You can do that?!” Naruto exclaimed.

“I’m the Hokage. What can they do?”

Sasuke blinked up at him, his eyebrows furrowing. “They can subvert you,” he reasoned.

“If they choose to unseat me as Hokage for doing the right thing, then so be it,” Kakashi insisted. “I should never have let them control me as much as they did. I see that now.”

Urgently, Sasuke contradicted him, “What good will it do to the plans if you get subverted before even breaking ground?”

“Then I guess the four of us would be out there with shovels, wouldn’t we?” Sasuke almost bit his tongue in surprise at Kakashi’s seriousness. “The Elders do not have the power to write bills. Neither Tsunade nor I dictated any repurpose of the Uchiha land, so the land itself is still rightfully and legally yours. We can do whatever we want on it. If I lose my title, it would be up to whoever the next Hokage is to do something about it, but as it stands the Feudal Lord currently has no other candidate for the position. Their next ideal shinobi still has a ways to go in the political nuance required for it.” His eyes narrowed subtly over toward Naruto, who once again did not catch onto the fact that he was being spoken about. “I don’t mean to flatter myself, but the Feudal Lord does tend to favor my opinion on things, and as would many of the other candidates I know he would currently have in his arsenal to choose from. I could be quite convincing, if I want to be.”

Still skeptical, Sasuke frowned up at him. He was startled when Sakura’s hand found his shoulder. She smiled up at him. “We’ve been working on this together all week. The Elders already know we’re pushing through with it, and it turns out that there’s really nothing they can do to stop it. It’s as Kakashi-sensei said: he’s too well-liked for them to interfere, and the only person who *really* has any say about unseating the Hokage is the Feudal Lord. And, to be honest, he’s kind of an idiot, and Kakashi-sensei already told him about the museum, and he said that he can’t wait to see it! So the Elders can’t really deny him it!”

Befuddled, Sasuke found Kakashi for him to confirm Sakura’s words. He hadn’t even known that Sakura knew about the plans for the memorial, let alone these kinds of details. Kakashi shrugged, “He doesn’t know exactly what we plan to put in the museum, and I don’t exactly plan to tell him.”

“But the Elders will tell him,” Sasuke voiced uncertainly.

“Doing so would mean they would have to admit their part in the Uchiha clan genocide, which, apparently, the Feudal Lord doesn’t completely know about,” Sakura informed him. “Everyone heard what you told them after the exam. The Feudal Lord is not the only one curious about what exactly it meant. It seems like there’s plenty of public interest about learning the truth of it all.” Huh. That was something. Surely there was still plenty the Elders could try to do to interfere, but if they were truly caught within the double-edged sword of the truth…

His other shoulder was weighed down with another hand, and Sasuke looked backwards at Naruto’s wide, closed mouthed smile. “We’ll be able to build the museum, Sasuke.”

And with Naruto’s reassurance, Sasuke took in the picture of these other three people. Sakura, spending her week assisting with the memorial’s plans despite it not being her job at all. Kakashi risking his position as Hokage. Naruto. They were all sacrificing their time and energy for him. Trying to make right by his clan for him.

How lucky he was to be a part of Team Seven.

_o-O-o_

Sasuke had spent the weekend guiltlessly between Naruto's apartment and the Hokage's office, where Team Seven huddled together over the plans of the memorial. Together they had found the right contractors for the job, but when it came to rebuilding the temple, Sasuke was pickier. Kakashi ended up calling Yamato, the old makeshift team captain currently babysitting Orochimaru, and after hearing his story Sasuke ended up agreeing that the wood-user would be the best option to rebuild it exactly. Yamato had been one of Orochimaru's test subjects, and also been manipulated by Danzo. The other three trusted him completely, and that along with his history made Sasuke respect him. He was another member of Team Seven, apparently.

Sasuke remembered about ten minutes through the conversation that he had once nearly killed this man in front of both Naruto and Sakura. He tried to not let the awkwardness of being plagued by this memory show.

Sunday night, Sakura pulled Sasuke aside while Kakashi kept Naruto busy. Her hand shielding her lips so that the sound wouldn't carry, Sakura reminded, "Don't forget: tomorrow, five o'clock! Hinata offered up the Hyuuga estate, as it's kind of the biggest place we could get. Kakashi and I are going to pick him up from his apartment and act like we're just gunna go to dinner together. It would probably make the most sense if you're there with us for that, if it's not too much to ask."

"I'll already be there, anyway," Sasuke shrugged.

Evidentially, this was something surprising to Sakura. She cocked her head, "…Will you?"

"I've been staying there all weekend." He had not intended for it to be a secret- not anymore at least. It would waste too much energy to try, and Sasuke did not care if people knew. He and Naruto were a team and there was no sense in hiding it. Especially considering the Elders would have a harder time of it trying to shut him up if everyone knew how close he was with the Great Shinobi Hero. Surely, Sakura had noticed that they left together every night?

Judging by the way her eyes went wide, she hadn't. "Oh. Well, okay, I mean- that. That's convenient." She was probably upset about it for some dumb reason. Sasuke wasn't in the mood to mull it over, though. The conversation ended abruptly when Naruto bounded over with top notch animatics over something offensive Kakashi had said to him.

_o-O-o_

The tenth of October arrived quietly that night.

Sasuke had Naruto's body cupped along his own, hooking his chin over his shoulder so that their cheeks rested together. Sasuke's arm had lost feeling pinned between their bodies, and what he had of the other arm was fastened over Naruto's chest. Naruto was snoring, but Sasuke caught sight of his alarm clock, visible in the slip of light coming from outside. He watched the minute hand meet up with the other on the twelve. A year ago, they would shortly be fighting to their intended deaths. The battle had resulted in a tie, but the war would go to Naruto. In the silence of the moment, Sasuke held him tighter.

The tenth of October arrived loudly that morning.

Sasuke's body was suddenly crushed by Naruto, who had jumped onto his stomach as he bellowed at Sasuke to wake up, "Good morning, Sasuke! I'm hungry, so make me something for breakfast!"

Not for the first time, Sasuke grumbled over the contrast of Naruto's energy in the mornings versus how he remembered Naruto to be in the past. He used to show up to training like he was sleepwalking. It was barely dawn, and here Naruto was at top volume. Scoffing, Sasuke glared at him, "Make it yourself."

With the click of his tongue, Naruto smugly pursed his lips, "It's my birthday! You have to cook for me!"

"*I* cooked on *my* birthday," Sasuke was quick to counter.

Which Naruto completely ignored. He leaned forward on top of Sasuke, his hands propping himself up on Sasuke's chest, weighing him down, "We have to eat early so that we're not too full for lunch. I always get Ichiraku's on my birthday!"

Lowly, Sasuke attested, "You get Ichiraku's three times a week."

"Ichiraku's is the best! We gotta eat now and then train real hard all morning so that we're hungry enough again by lunchtime. It's my birthday tradition!" Naruto exclaimed.

Frowning, Sasuke wanted to roll his eyes, but he stopped himself. If it was a birthday tradition, then it must be followed, because his last birthday was spent nearly bleeding out to death by Sasuke's own doing. With a sigh, Sasuke asked him, giving up, "…What do you want?"

"*Pancakes*," they both said in unison with contrasting expressions.

_o-O-o_

They had not seen many other people all weekend, instead holing up in the Hokage office ironing out details. Sasuke hadn't thought much of it at all until they walked the busy streets shortly after noon. They had spent the morning after their breakfast at the edge of the village in their training field, working themselves sore on honing their bodies, so they paid little attention to what was going on toward the center of town.

There were banners and balloons donning every shop, lining the streets with celebration. Pop-up stands were selling fried food and memorabilia. Children were running around popping little confetti canons, splashing the streets with their color. Festive masks and robes were being sold every three meters, intermittently spattered between stands of candy and sweet pastries.

The pair of them had frozen in their spots as they rounded the corner to see it all. Eventually, Naruto admitted, "I had completely forgotten the village was doing this today."

The one-year anniversary of the end of the Fourth Shinobi War. The people were celebrating. An uncomfortable emotion flipped over in Sasuke's stomach. Making the decision to keep

himself stabbed into the side of Konoha like a blade was one thing, but having that debut happen during such festivities was not what he had in mind, especially not after what he did a week ago at the Chunin exams.

He didn't have much of a choice, though, because Naruto was already pointing to a stand that was hosting a carnival bottle-breaking game. "Bet you I'll shatter more bottles than you!"

With the way Naruto was clenching his fist and smirking, Sasuke could not deny the challenge. His uneasiness ebbed at the sight of it. "You're on."

The attendant was the first person to recognize them, stammering on for a minute, clearly confused as to how to act. Any fear that he harbored toward Sasuke clashed with the admiration for Naruto. His reaction sparked others' attention, who came to crowd around. The attendant insisted on letting Naruto play for free, wishing him a happy birthday no less than three times as he gave them their throwing shuriken.

A few more people gathered around, watching the two of them shatter every bottle the attendant put out. Sasuke eyed them carefully, perturbed. Someone in the crowd might at any time voice their displeasure at him being here, or try to start some type of attack against him. Nothing came, though. Instead, he startled when someone shouted his name.

They were cheering him on. Some random Konoha resident wanted to see him win, to beat their Great Shinobi Hero at a pointless festival game.

Sasuke did not know what to do about it; it seemed Naruto, himself, was caught between reactions at it. On one hand was jubilance, the desire to grin widely at whomever heckled their game with praise toward Sasuke, and on the other was severe jealousy, the desire to wail at whomever heckled their game with praise toward *Sasuke*. With the contradiction on Naruto's face, Sasuke found he could do nothing but laugh at the situation. Laugh, and do his damnedest to win.

They argued over who won, because multiple bottles were demolished by both of their shuriken hitting them at the same time. Sharingan out, Sasuke was able to see that his shuriken touched the glasses first the majority of the time; Naruto demanded a rematch, his eyelids now orange with Sage Mode. Naruto barely beat him on the second game, the attendant having placed out six times as many bottles.

When Sasuke called Naruto out for cheating by using wind nature on the shuriken, Naruto gloated that Sasuke was just jealous he couldn't do the same. Sasuke pointed to the sign prohibiting jutsu, thus disqualifying him from the game, so Naruto demanded another rematch.

The attendant apologized. Apparently, he had laid out every single bottle he had left on their last match.

"You should play another game!" a small girl no older than five tugged at Sasuke's cloak, making him jump. "There's another stall over there!" Just as Sasuke was trying to work out how to respond to such a tiny child inserting herself into their conversation, her father rushed up to her to scold her for speaking so informally.

They had certainly garnered a bit of a crowd much larger than the few people who had cheered him on at the start of their game. It made no sense to Sasuke why other people would be so interested in watching him and Naruto play a stupid festival game. But Naruto, being Naruto, was incredibly unaware of it all, and took the mention of finding a different competition to partake in very seriously. “Oh, yeah! Let’s go!” He grabbed Sasuke by the wrist and dragged him unceremoniously to a different stall.

Sasuke had not expected to spend the day in the crowded midst of a festival. The crowds were thick and always gathered around them, constantly calling out and wishing Naruto a happy birthday and doing bizarre things like congratulating them on their match last week. There was one man twice their age who bowed no less than seven times in their encounter. Sasuke was desperate to escape the crowd, still wary of their reaction toward him, but Naruto-

Naruto was beaming. Literally- Sasuke could see his chakra, emanating outwards from him, glowing gently but brightly. His abundance of joy was infectious, infatuating the citizens as he passed them. Sasuke found himself walking closer next to Naruto’s side, coming within reach of that aura’s shield as if Naruto had somehow procured his own Susanoo, and the protection of being within its boundaries kept Sasuke safe.

It had taken about an hour for Naruto to remember why they had come into town to begin with. It must be some festival to pull his attention away from ramen for so long, Sasuke marveled. The old man at the shop congratulated Naruto on turning eighteen before placing down the largest bowl Sasuke had ever seen in front of him. Before Sasuke had time to chide him on it, another bowl of the same size was set down in front of him, as well. Miso with the stewed tomatoes. Their meal was complimentary, the old man insisted.

Immediately after, Sasuke was being pulled to more stalls. Naruto was somehow still hungry enough for dango and taiyaki. There were many other games to compete in. Hours passed by, and the longer it went on the more Sasuke realized he didn’t mind the festival at all. Naruto was happy, and Sasuke didn’t want to be anywhere else but by his side. It wasn’t until Sasuke overheard a family talking about dinner that he remembered to check the time. He had to get Naruto back to his apartment; they had spent nearly four and a half hours at the festival.

It took some convincing to pull Naruto away. But on Sasuke’s side was that Naruto had been lugging around two giant plush frogs he won from one of the stalls for a good hour, and they were getting in the way. He was also carrying bags of other useless items (most of them given to him for free by certain admirers manning shop stands). Sasuke was only able to drag him away by falsely promising him they would return to the festival after dropping off all of the cumbersome items back at Naruto’s apartment.

Naruto fell on top of his bed, giant frogs and cumbersome bags still in his hands. The cat, who had been peaceful just moments prior, startled greatly at the mass of weight that came too close to crushing it. It bolted upright, perching on the open windowsill. “No, Teme-chan!” Naruto wailed lazily over toward it.

But Sasuke was more concerned with, “Did you open the window again after I closed it?!”

Bottom lip jutting out, Naruto whined, “It’s the only way he can come in when we’re not here!”

Dumbass. “Get a damn cat door, then.”

Humming for a good moment, Naruto sat up. “Oh! Right! You said that.” The lack of common sense was astounding. Already distracted from it, though, Naruto overshared, “I gotta take a shit.” Sasuke rolled his eyes as Naruto dashed for the bathroom. He moved all of Naruto’s bags and stuffed animals to the floor so that he could sit on the bed; it was Naruto’s job to find a home for all of this useless stuff. It no doubt would do nothing but crowd the already tiny apartment.

As he thought it, Sasuke’s eyes fell upon the familiar blue lantern, still situated on Naruto’s nightstand from when Sasuke had placed it there months ago. It had become a fixture in the room, to the point where Sasuke usually forgot it was there. The Uchiha insignia, so carefully crafted by Sakura’s mindful fingers, tugged at too many emotions in him. It was another useless thing crowding Naruto’s apartment, and yet Naruto kept it.

Sasuke laid back on the bed so that he didn’t have to look at it.

It was nice to be back in the quiet of Naruto’s apartment again. Crowds always exhausted him, but the ones today were downright confusing. They seemed joyous to be in Naruto’s presence, but most gave wary glances to Sasuke the whole way. There were a few who didn’t. The person who cheered for him. That little girl who tugged on his cloak. A young shinobi who probably only had his headband for a month that lamented how cool the Susanoo was. A mother who bowed deeply and thanked him for his part in the war. Sasuke had a harder time coming to terms with them than he did all of the people (mainly adults who must have aided in oppressing the Uchiha before the massacre) who openly glared at him.

They had all heard Sasuke’s speech to the Elders. He remembered exactly what he had said, etched into his memory by his Mangekyou. He had spoken about Itachi, had outright called them out for what they had done, blaming the Uchiha genocide on his brother like it was just a deranged act from another crazy Uchiha. Sakura had said that there were people who were curious about what it meant…

A small mew brought Sasuke out of his thoughts. The cat was massaging its paws into the mattress next to him, tail high. On instinct, Sasuke presented the back of his hand for it to rub its face against. The gentle purr rumbled out, a sound Sasuke always found soothing. It made itself comfortable stepping up onto Sasuke’s stomach. Sasuke enjoyed cats, more so than just because they were a symbol of his clan. This one had seemed to become another fixture in Naruto’s home. Despite its stupid name, Sasuke did feel warmly to it. He scratched its ears idly, its small head pressing further into his hand before turning around and arching its back for him to pet its glossy fur.

With the cat turned around and its tail high, Sasuke noticed something… interesting.

The jealously emanated across the room a few minutes later, and Sasuke felt it before he even saw Naruto glowering at him. “T-Teme-chan!” The cat glared its luminous eyes at Naruto in response. Finger pointing accusingly at him, Naruto focused his disgruntlement at Sasuke.

“Y-You probably smell like catnip from that bottle you always have on you! He still likes me better!” With the way the cat turned its head away, ears back at Naruto’s noise, Sasuke doubted that. Naruto was across the room, lifting the cat from Sasuke’s stomach and holding it tight to his own chest. “Yeah, he likes me better, don’t you Teme-chan?”

Two seconds of letting Naruto scratch his head and then the cat wiggled out of the uncomfortable hold, gracefully landing back on the bed to saunter over to the other side of it, where Naruto couldn’t reach.

“Hey! I’m the one who feeds you!” Naruto whined. He turned his pout downward into his chest, “I’m the one who feeds him and lets him sleep in my bed! And he slept next to my lap once! He only likes you because you smell like catnip!”

Sasuke informed him, feeling quite satisfied to do so, “You know that cat’s female, right?”

It successfully stopped him from what was sure to be another half hour of exasperating complaining. He was blinking fast, and making cut off noises in his flounder. “…W-What? No, he’s-” but Naruto cut himself off, eyes wide at the cat, who had its back turned to Naruto, unaffectedly cleaning its face. “What do you mean?” Naruto asked quietly.

“It’s female.”

“What the hell are you talking about?!” Naruto demanded. Apparently, he was going through the stages of grief over it.

Sasuke scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Check for yourself.”

Naruto did check, rudely grabbing the cat around the middle and lifting it into the air. The cat squirmed, flailing its claws around in a panic as Naruto grabbed its tail and pulled it up to get a better view. Sasuke watched as the color rose in his cheeks.

The cat’s claws caught the flesh of Naruto’s forearm, leaving deep scratches down the length of it as it made its escape. Naruto hardly reacted to the cuts. With a reproachful glare backward, the cat flicked its tail and then left the apartment through the window, clearly offended by Naruto’s insolence. As the silence grew, Sasuke found it harder to not laugh. He let out a soft chuckle, which seemed to break Naruto’s quiet. “Don’t laugh, you asshole!” he shouted, finger in Sasuke’s face again.

But Sasuke had found a silver lining, “You’ll have to rename it.”

“‘T-Teme-chan’ is an androgynous name!” Naruto stuttered, edging on hysterics. “And you’re feminine enough for it to still work, anyway.”

Sasuke’s body jerked forward, and he raised up slightly onto his elbow. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Your face is girly!”

Knitting his eyebrows together, Sasuke scoffed and fell back onto the bed. “That’s not an insult.”

“No, it’s a fact!” he continued to press as though it *was* an insult.

Lip twitching, Sasuke confronted him, “You gunna have another panic attack over my ‘pretty’ face again?”

Naruto’s fists bundled into Sasuke’s shirt, lifting him into more of a sitting position. Clearly, Sasuke had struck a nerve. “I think it would look *prettier* with a few of my knuckles imprinted into it.”

They were too close to each other to do anything to each other besides kiss. Sasuke had not planned on it, but then again he had not expected for Naruto to get this riled up over a damn cat’s genitalia. And when Naruto got like that, charging up the electric field between them- well. They were like magnets. Naruto, so infuriating, always managing to elicit a reaction out of him when no one else could. He had spent so many years feeling nothing, chasing after the only emotion he could feel remnants of- his anger. Fighting with Naruto never seemed to be rooted in anger. Annoyance, yes. But the frustration he brought about was more like an itch in need of scratching. Building up, and then the release-

The release was intoxicating. Emotions. Even when they were kids, bickering nonstop, Sasuke had been addicted to the way Naruto made him feel. The frustration and annoyance covered up Sasuke’s obsession with the boy. He didn’t know how to express it in any other way, so he sought out the argumentative connection. It was backwards, so backwards, but Sasuke still clung to it.

Kissing was a better release. Sasuke’s body lit up with it. It was much easier to understand the gradations of just how he felt this way. Fondness. Sasuke loved how Naruto could be so open with his emotions. It was a trait he never let himself have, thinking it would make him too vulnerable. Naruto was somehow able to express every bit of himself without concern, never had to calculate his every reaction. Of course Sasuke was jealous of that.

It was obvious that what they were doing was a competition, like most things between them were. Naruto had something to prove to him, and he did it by pressing Sasuke down into the plush mattress, bruising their lips. Sasuke had hoped that him having been the one to initiate the kiss would have surprised Naruto to the point of getting flustered, but no such luck. He was too prepared for it. Must have been from all of those times leading up to the third exam, when the competition of it all had them making out after every little dispute.

After a few minutes of it, Naruto suddenly pulled back, his bottom lip pouting. Sasuke could see that he had an idea rattling through that head of his. “It’s my birthday,” he stated, not looking Sasuke in the eye.

As if Sasuke had somehow not been there when every random stranger they passed on the street tripped over themselves to wish him their congratulations this afternoon. “I’m aware.”

Naruto sat up, his hips in Sasuke’s lap. Staring up at the headrest of the bed, which they lay perpendicular on, Naruto lamented, “You haven’t gotten me a birthday present.”

This was a confusing thing to mention. He and Naruto had never gotten each other birthday presents. “Do you want one?”

With a smirk, Naruto caught Sasuke's eye; his bashfulness vanished with a devilish glint, "I can think of something you can do for me." Furrowing his brow, Sasuke watched curiously as Naruto walked on his knees upwards, until he was straddling Sasuke's chest. *Oh*, Sasuke realized. The thrill of it coursed through him, eying the way Naruto thumbed the button on his pants.

Naruto was already half hard, growing by the second. He guided himself forward. Sasuke's mouth opened on instinct as Naruto presented himself to his lips. Though he had only done this a few times this past week, now, Sasuke felt like the motions were ingrained. Tongue wandering along the length, lips tightening around the girth, throat relaxing itself into pliancy. He had done well to not gag much in the past, but this position was different from the other times. Naruto was above him, and though he kept as still as he could, the subconscious way his hips trembled was trickier for Sasuke to deal with.

"G-… Your mouth is so hot." There it was- the babbling had started already. It always did when Naruto was being pleasured, but this was a bit sooner than usual. "You are so-" he grunted, "annoying. Good at everything. Asshole." It made Sasuke chuckle, the vibrations of it eliciting another moan from Naruto. "Shut up," Naruto told him when he found his voice again. "I- I'm better at this than you!" he told himself, something Sasuke really did not care about. "-'Ve practiced. And- and you're so- *good*," he slipped. He tried to back track on that, failing by instead saying, "I mean- your mouth is just- it's- ah- *do that again*." Sasuke continued the motion of his tongue under the sensitive head.

Salty fluid was starting to pool into Sasuke's mouth, so he licked at the head to collect it. Naruto's hips buckled, forcing himself on instinct back into the heat.

"Ah- sorry- you-" Naruto flustered, his whole body shaking. With another hard suck, Sasuke shut him up again, letting him know it was alright. The silence didn't last long at all. "'Should do this all the time. Today was great. It should be my birthday every day. Festival was fun, and- and I beat you! I won that- that one game. That was fun." He struggled to take a breath between the talking and the pleasure. "'So is this. I like when you're under me. We should do this a lot. 'Doesn't have to be my birthday to do this." The babbling was downright ridiculous. Sasuke couldn't contain his laughter. He did his best to keep his lips around Naruto, but it had become rather difficult. "St-Stop laughing, you jerk-" Naruto tried to scold him, but his body was going rigid.

There was no warning for it. Sasuke's mouth was suddenly full of Naruto's taste. He had never done that before; Naruto always had the sense to warn him, but this time it seemed to be a surprise for him as well. It was a rather quick ordeal.

He could tell that Naruto had lost most of his ability to function, but he forced himself to pull back. He had an apologetic hand to Sasuke's cheek, "Shit- sorry- you don't have to-"

But Sasuke didn't mind. He had already swallowed what was in his mouth. Pulling Naruto's length back in, he placed a gentle kiss to the side of the head. Oversensitive, Naruto squirmed. He focused a few kisses along Naruto's abdomen, in the creases of his hips still hovering just above. Naruto was breathing heavily. Idly, Sasuke wondered if having him pinned underneath him was what made Naruto finish so quickly. He had mentioned somewhere in that incessant babble about liking when Sasuke was under him. When Sasuke

reached his belly button, he began to scoot back, giving Sasuke the room to go higher. Sasuke lifted himself into a sitting position and let himself be kissed. Naruto was tugging at Sasuke's clothes, hands low between them.

The banging on the door was almost simultaneous with its opening. "Naruto! We're here!"

Shit.

He could hear Kakashi from the entrance way, nervously suggesting, "Ah-Sakura- we should probably not- I mean-"

Both he and Naruto moved within the blink of an eye. Naruto had done himself up and rushed over to block the doorway of the bedroom from view. Sasuke adjusted the bed, pulling out the creases of the blankets, before instinctually hiding behind the large potted plant in the corner of the room. "S-Sakura!" Naruto was laughing too loudly, his feigned casual stance too obvious. "W-What are you guys doing here?!"

"Happy birthday, Naruto! We've come to collect you for your birthday dinner!" Sakura beamed.

"D-Dinner?" Naruto stuttered.

"Ah, Sakura, maybe we should come back in a few minutes-" Kakashi was all but begging, for some reason- the reason hit Sasuke over the head. Kakashi's nose. He *definitely* knew what he and Naruto had been getting up to moments ago. With the window open, Sakura would not be able to smell anything from the entranceway, but with Kakashi's superior nose…

"No- no!" Naruto attempted to sound light. "We were- we were just-"

That *idiot*. Sasuke came forward out of his hiding spot, interjecting before Naruto said something absolutely asinine. "We were just about to head back out to the festival," his voice was level and unaffected, because he was a damn *shinobi* who knew how to keep a *secret*.

"Right! The festival! We just stopped back here for a minute to drop off our stuff," he laughed forcefully, rubbing the back of his head.

"Oh! Did you guys enjoy yourselves?" Sakura asked innocently, *so* innocently.

Naruto was unable to answer, his mind reeling with the double entendre. Clicking his tongue, Sasuke knocked past Naruto, who was still hogging the doorway. "Come on. Let's go," he expertly diverted the subject. Kakashi smiled uneasily at him, confirming what Sasuke had *hoped* he misread.

…Whatever.

_o-O-o_

Chapter End Notes

i just wanted to voice my sincerest appreciation to everyone who has commented on this fic, especially within the last few chapters here. each one gets me so damn giddy to read. i loved reading everyone's theories about where the story was going!!! y'all had really great ideas lol! if only i had thought of them while writing it haha. some of you i WANTED to say got things right/almost right, but had to stop myself from spoiling my own story!

only a few more chapters and an epilogue left! thank you all for sticking around to read this far!!

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Chapter Notes

> alcohol warning for the next two chapters! everyone is 18, so depending on where you are, that's underage? but like, you cannot tell me that konoha, who sends actual children to WAR, legitimately has a drinking age

_o-O-o_

Gullible as he always was, it was Naruto's fluster that made him even easier to trick than usual into going to the Hyuuga estate. He was still talking too much and too loudly to focus on such trifling things. It wasn't until they were walking up the main building's front steps that he looked around. "…Hyuuga?"

"Oh! Yeah, sorry, I just had to drop something with Hinata off, first," Sakura played coolly.

"Okay," he replied, subdued.

Sakura and Kakashi each grabbed a handle of the double doors at the same time, and Sasuke made sure to step out of main view, hiding in Naruto's shadow for when they opened them.

The roar of the crowd yelling the surprise overwhelmed Sasuke's ears. He stepped further back behind the blockade of the door. The noise didn't stop, people intermittently yelling out their birthday wishes into the applause that had erupted out. The main building was packed with people, a large number of whom Sasuke had no recollection of. Some faces were familiar, while others he was sure he had never met before.

All of them most definitely knew who he was. Being beside Naruto, it was impossible to be inconspicuous. They had all heard his speech to the Elders after the exam, but that meant nothing without context. How many of them openly hated him? How many of the adults in the room participated in his clan's oppression? How many of the younger ones wished for him to be behind bars? And with the number of foreign headbands, how many lived in a country who still had a warrant for his arrest? The loudness in his ears morphed to something sinister. Perhaps it would be better if Sasuke wasn't-

Naruto turned back to Sasuke. He had the wideset grin on his face, the light of it emanating outwardly. Sasuke could see his chakra, feel its warmth, even from the distance. He was, for once, shocked into silence. With all of these people here for him, surprising him, celebrating him, Naruto's first reaction was to turn backwards to Sasuke as if he was some kind of confirmation, as if Sasuke's presence made it real.

As if Sasuke was being accounted for.

The glance backwards didn't last long. Naruto's attention was back on the large party awaiting him. But before he turned, Sasuke saw a shimmer in his blue eyes, the glint of it leaving an impression in Sasuke's psyche. As Naruto ran forward to greet the people closest to him, excitement all but vibrating his entire aura, Sasuke stood rooted. He watched Naruto jabbering away as people crowded him.

Thankfully, no one else was paying attention to Sasuke. He was still hidden behind the cloak of Naruto's exuberance. There were many people here for him to greet, and Naruto gave them each due diligence. There was more confetti being shot into the air and glittering down around him, more people hooting in accompaniment.

Sasuke knew he didn't belong, but at the same time he couldn't leave. He was never one for parties, even before the massacre. His parents, being heads of the clan, threw a good number of them in his youth. He had been required to be there, as one of the heirs to their title. As always when he was little, he stuck by Itachi's side the entire time until his parents told him he was free to go back to his room. He had never been a social being. But he had already made a vow to himself that he would stay for *this* party. Any gathering where Naruto was to be celebrated was one where he would be present. Still, he wasn't a fan-

Naruto had turned back around to him again, and over the noise Sasuke could hear that he had said his name. Sasuke blinked in surprise at Naruto's face, where there were tears openly streaming down his cheeks. Blatantly displaying his emotions, completely unbothered to be crying in the direct attention of all of these people. His grin had somehow grown even wider than before, amplified by the wet streaks. In his awe, Sasuke completely missed what had been said about him, but it didn't seem important because Naruto had turned back to his admirers a moment later.

Sasuke startled when a hand hit his shoulder. "Let's go in!" Kakashi smiled at him. Sasuke let himself be maneuvered into the building. Thankfully, he was not led far. Kakashi leaned them both against the wall nearest the entrance. "I'm glad he's enjoying it so much already," he said idly. Sasuke's attention caught on the way Naruto had his hand to Gaara's shoulder, bellowing out his laughter.

"Yeah," Sasuke watched Naruto interact with the group, narrowing his eyes at how close Gaara stayed by his side. Naruto had too much else to focus on, though, with the Hachibi jinchuuriki saying something ridiculous to him. Gut flipping over at the sight of that man, Sasuke clenched his jaw tight. Others from their graduating class were also there trying to pull his attention. He was glad to just sit back and watch. The last thing he wanted to do was insert himself next to Naruto and ruin the enthusiasm, no matter how much he wanted to blockade Gaara. That would be ridiculous, and Naruto deserved to enjoy being with his friends on his birthday.

"He seems exceptionally glad that you're here as well," Kakashi added.

Eyebrows furrowed, Sasuke inquired, "What are you talking about?"

With a chuckle, Kakashi pointed out, "That's the fifth time he's looked back here at you." … That was true. Naruto, as animated by the crowd as he was, did keep stealing glances back at Sasuke; it was as if he was making sure Sasuke was still there, or that he wanted to send over

bits of the joy he felt for Sasuke to share. There was a part of him worried Sasuke would leave, and every time he turned to see Sasuke was still there, his excitement tripled. Well, now Sasuke *couldn't* leave, even if he wanted to.

Suspicious, Sasuke squinted his eyes at his old teacher. Oddly convenient that Sasuke solidified that final conclusion due to Kakashi's carefully placed words. He wanted to ask something, but hesitated. They were in quite the crowded room. Sasuke assessed the party. No one was paying attention to them. Steeling himself, Sasuke asked, barely louder than a whisper, "How long have you known?"

"Since you guys were twelve." Kakashi's answer came quick, like he had known Sasuke was going to ask him that. That young? Sasuke scoffed. He was bullshitting. Reading the scoff, Kakashi continued, "I've had my share of rivalries, too, you know." Did he? He thought back to what he knew of that man in the mask, Obito was his real name, he came to find out. That, and… Sasuke's eyes found the other man, the one in a wheelchair across the room. The thought of it made Sasuke very uncomfortable, so he stopped thinking about it. "But it was more to do with other things."

Okay, Sasuke was *very* curious. "Like?" he goaded.

With a smirk, Kakashi addressed, "Why would a boy so hellbent on killing his brother sacrifice his life for someone else before achieving said goal?"

That fucking bridge. Sasuke wrenched his eyes shut. Yes, all things considered, that fucking bridge was probably the first indication of his uncontrollable desire to protect Naruto. Well, not the first, but definitely the most trying of that time period. His body moving on its own, as if being a personal shield was input in him like a line of code on a computer program. Hoping to brush it off, Sasuke attested, "We were kids."

"First off, you're still kids," Kakashi inserted. "And second, Naruto remained just as dedicated to bringing you home safely back then as he did last year."

Despite himself, Sasuke could feel heat flaring up in his cheeks. He turned his face the other way. "That's just Naruto."

"Mhm, and it was just *you* last year trying to wrap him in bubble wrap in the middle of a war."

Sasuke snapped back, "*Both* of us needed to survive to undo the Tsukuyomi-"

"Which is why you were still protecting him before the Tsukuyomi was even placed." The casual, flippant way he said it had Sasuke nearly growling. The flash of frustration surged, but Sasuke couldn't do anything about it. He *did* protect Naruto multiple times before the Tsukuyomi, before he had visited the Sage of Six Paths and learned that both he and Naruto were the key to saving the world. Armoring the Kyuubi with his Susanoo, and all. "To be honest, I never thought you would have it in you to reconnect with him so quickly. I thought it would take you another five years to open back up to him." Like *that* would have been possible. Sasuke was already too surprised he managed to hold out as long as he had. "But your visits became more regular. And I noticed your chakra signature around his apartment."

His frustration came to a point. “Stalker,” he bit.

Chuckling, Kakashi rubbed the back of his head, “I was only concerned about you. I thought that you’d get cold feet and disappear the night before your birthday. …And then I sensed that both you and Naruto had started fighting rather seriously for just a spar and thought I should rush in to break it up, and… well, noticed that you guys had found your own way to resolve it.” Own way to…?

Sasuke’s eyes went wide, his face flooding with heat. He remembered that night, Naruto’s mixed emotions running high from Sasuke having missed a week, their punches heavier than they should have been. He remembered Naruto’s lips colliding into his own, desperate for some type of connection, some proof that Sasuke was actually *there*. They had been too conspicuous, too caught up in the emotions. Of course Kakashi would have followed him that night-

Waving his hands in front of him, Kakashi assured, “I- uh- left, after that. I figured you didn’t need me intruding, and I promise you I have no desire to oversee my students’ private lives like that-”

But Sasuke, hands moving as fast as light itself, snatched the book in Kakashi’s hip pack. He held it up in between them, satisfied by the way Kakashi panicked. “I will light this on fire.”

More nervous than Sasuke had ever seen him, Kakashi gingerly pried his dumb book from Sasuke’s grip. “Aha, please, Sasuke, this is a special edition and I- I promise it had been completely unintentional!”

All of that bullshit about discerning Sasuke’s feelings when he was a child- Kakashi only knew because he *saw them kiss*, that pretentious pervert. Alright, perhaps he could have seen some things before Sasuke had the realization in him to suppress them, and maybe Naruto always was and always will be an open book, and by chance he could conclude some level of their bond by the way they fought together during the war… But, no, Sasuke had been at his height of walling himself off, and Naruto was like that with *everyone*. Pressing his back firmly against the wall, Sasuke muttered, “Why’d you keep trying to push Sakura in my face, then?”

“Because I would very much like it if you were to have a conversation with her about her feelings,” Kakashi replied simply. He had placed his book back into a pack on the other side of his hip out of Sasuke’s immediate reach. At Sasuke’s glare, he raised an eyebrow, “She’s strung herself up for you too high for anyone else to bring her down. Every time I try to talk to her about it, she pretends like she can’t hear me and changes the subject.”

Sasuke’s nose wrinkled, “And why is that my problem?”

Kakashi was silent for a moment, leaving Sasuke’s flippancy to ring out in the quiet. It made him feel more guilty than if Kakashi had scolded him. After a moment of it, Kakashi made it worse, “It’s not your problem. You’re not intentionally dragging her around. But it’s obvious that she needs help understanding your true feelings. The longer she hides in her delusions, the more she’ll hurt herself when she finally figures out the truth. I was hoping that she’d be able to piece it together on her own if I got you two to talk more, but at this point I think the

only way to make her see it is for you to say it directly to her with no sugar coating. Like how you used to." Grinding his teeth, Sasuke tried to settle the uneasy turning in his stomach. Sighing greatly, Kakashi lamented, "But I recognize that doing that now would be much harder for you than it was in the past."

Yes, it would be much harder now. How many times had Sasuke rejected her when they were kids? It used to be a daily occurrence: her throwing herself at him, him flat-out denying her in the next sentence. He didn't care, back then. Regardless of how little he regarded her, he never felt any guilt about it because, while she would pout for a few minutes or so, she'd be back to her usual drooling self shortly enough. She kept coming back, which meant he had not truly hurt her. Back then he used to wish that he *would* hurt her enough to get her to stop. She was annoying.

Now it was different. If he had his old coldness, the one rooted in his ambition and bleeding grief, he might have been able to. But his grief didn't bleed, now, and he only had so few people in his life. Sakura was one of them. She defended him. And she understood more, now, about his wounds. It may have taken her far too many years, but it seemed her feelings for him were no longer the shallow infatuation it had been in the past. She was seeing *him* more now, not whatever made up version for him she used to harbor.

As much as Sasuke hated to admit it, Kakashi was right. The longer Sakura kept up her delusions, the harder she would fall from them. And it *wasn't* Sasuke's job to make her see light, but… if he was her friend, wouldn't he not want to see her get hurt? If there was something he could do to stop it, but didn't, what kind of person would he be? She didn't *need* to come off of a shift at the hospital to spend what she had of her free time on plans for his clan's museum. She didn't *need* to spend hours meticulously handcrafting a lantern for him for a ceremony she didn't know was fake.

"One of these days I'll repay you for all of these guilt trips you're so fond of," Sasuke grumbled.

Smugly grinning back, Kakashi replied, "What are you talking about? This is my retribution for all the guilt *you've* put me through." It was a joke, lighthearted, and Sasuke rolled his eyes to hide his smile.

Their solitude in the crowd had come to an end; Kakashi was Hokage, after all. Guy had rolled over to engage in a conversation that was far too rambunctious for Sasuke. He found it very easy to slip out from it unnoticed, sending a careful glance at the two old *rivals* as he went. The now tainted word had him eyeing the crowd for Naruto, who was still in the center of the mob. With a bitter, flitting eye to Gaara, who was annoyingly right at Naruto's side, Sasuke slipped through a door and found a kitchen lined with food where people were milling about and filling plates in buffet style. It was less busy in here, so Sasuke took a moment to breathe. Like always, conversation with Kakashi was exhausting.

He didn't have much time to collect his thoughts before he was being approached. "Ah, Sasuke-kun!" He blinked up at his name to a pale, smiling face. Sasuke remembered this man as being his replacement on Team Seven. He also remembered that this guy had once attempted to assassinate him on Danzo's orders. All of this in mind, Sasuke grunted a response, really, really hoping he would catch the hint and *not* talk to him. No such luck. "I'm

surprised to see you here! You are not usually one for parties, I would imagine. But, as it's for Naruto, I suppose it shouldn't be unusual for you to be here."

What the hell was that supposed to mean? Sasuke furrowed his brows at this man. He remembered his fighting style- chakra enlaced into ink on paper and brought to life. Other than that, he didn't know much about him, save for the fact that his constant smile was only millimeters deep.

Said smile hardly changed as the man caught Sasuke's confusion, "Oh, I guess this is what's known as an awkward conversation! If we ignore how briefly we regarded each other in the war, the only other time we met wasn't a great way to start a friendship." No, definitely not. "Perhaps we should start over? I have read that sometimes it can help mend relationships by attempting to redo introductions on better terms." He then held his hand out in front of him, "Hello, Sasuke-kun. My name is Sai. Naruto and Sakura-chan have spoken very highly of you!"

…How the fuck was Sasuke supposed to respond to that?

Thankfully, the door to the kitchen opened, and a familiar head of pink hair spotted them. Her eyes went wide for a moment as she registered what was happening, with Sai outstretching a hand that Sasuke still had not shaken. "Sasuke-kun, Sai…" Sakura mumbled in her shock.

"Sakura-chan!" Sai said brightly in greeting, though still sounding so robotic. Thankfully, he dropped his hand so that Sasuke didn't have to pointedly not shake it anymore. "I was just re-introducing myself to Sasuke-kun. I was hoping that doing so would make it less awkward between us."

Nervously, Sakura asked, "Did you get that advice from another book?"

"Yes!"

With an apologetic glance toward Sasuke, Sakura explained gently, patting his shoulder, "Not all of the advice in those books are great for real-life practice in the technical form, Sai. It can be a little strange in an actual conversation."

He dropped his smile for something more contemplative. "Ah!" With a finger to his chin, he pondered, "It's like when the book told me to be honest with people, but you got mad at me for calling you ugly."

Her switch having been triggered, Sakura's helpful demeanor burned away under her anger. She clutched the front of Sai's shirt. "*I know you do this on purpose, now*," she threatened through her teeth.

Finally, Sasuke saw what had to have been a real smile, because there was a jarring slyness to it. "I'll go check in on Naruto, now," he diverted, stepping backwards out of the danger that was Sakura's grip. As he left, the smile fell, and there was almost no expression left on his face at all. Without it, his eyes were cold. He said, in the flattest voice, "It was nice to re-meet you, Sasuke-kun." And then he left, leaving a bubbling suspicion that Sakura was not the only person he had been teasing in his wake.

Perturbed, Sasuke tried not to let it affect him, but he couldn't place that man's intentions at all. At the very least he knew that it was anything but friendly. With the click of her tongue, Sakura rolled her eyes, "Ignore him. Would you like to get something to eat?"

Still trying to discern Sai, Sasuke shook his head.

"Well, the others are grabbing a bottle of sake," she said with dropped shoulders and an eye roll. "They're planning on getting Naruto drunk for the first time, which is probably going to be a nightmare."

Yikes. Sasuke frowned to himself, "Will that work? Doesn't the Kyuubi's chakra burn poison away?"

The thought hadn't occurred to her. With a finger to her chin, she pondered, "Well, I've seen him affected by poison before. And he usually has that chakra stored elsewhere, so I think it'll work on him fine." With a pout, she added, "It'd be great if it didn't work, though. Can you imagine him drunk? I'm gunna have to babysit him all night."

While he did not consider her line of thinking far off, Sasuke felt a drop of emotion fall into his stomach. He considered her for a moment, then turned his head to say, "You don't have to worry about that. You should enjoy the party. I'll take care of him."

Her hands clasped together just before her chest, that familiar stance of nerves she always caved into around him. Guarding her heart, tentative to his moods, but luring herself further into him the whole way. Sasuke realized that she misconstrued that he was trying to be considerate of her- which, he was, yes, but not wholly. What he meant that it was impossible for him to put Naruto's safety on any lower standard, now. He would *always* have an eye out for him, every possible threat to him a caution that had somehow weaseled its way to the top of Sasuke's priorities. "It'll probably take both of us, anyway," she said as though offhand, even though Sasuke could practically feel her heartbeat from the distance. "But if you're interested in a drink, at all…"

"I have no interest in alcohol," he shut down immediately.

"Oh, right, I figured," she giggled past her nerves. "In any case, you should enjoy yourself here, too!" A redundant statement: the only way Sasuke would enjoy himself tonight was if he left, preferably with Naruto.

It wasn't lost on Sasuke that Sakura had just tried to ask him for a drink. The implications of it were not something he could deny, and though she did display a pang of hurt at his rejection, he could tell that she had not taken it as the hint she should have. It had zoomed right past her, her shield of delusion impervious to his true meaning. Kakashi's words still ringing in his ears, mutating his guilt, he started uneasily, "S-Sakura…"

She blinked up at him, her soft green eyes giving him that hopeful look, affected as if him speaking her name was enough for her to feed her starvation of him for months. "Yes, Sasuke-kun?" her voice sounded like mist, barely there. It bothered him, her use of those honorifics he had never once mimicked for her before. He rarely respected anyone enough to

use honorifics, sure enough never her. Even after all these years, after everything he put her through, she still used it for him.

How was he supposed to do this? Kakashi had said it before; deny her outright, no sugar-coating. But doing so as randomly as now- that surely would not be the kindest way to do it, would it? She was in front of him, looking so hopeful, so absorbed into his every word. He could reject her right now, say the words, but the shock of it would crush her, and Sasuke had no clue how to deal with that aftermath. Would it be kinder to wait for it to come up in conversation? When would that happen?

God, this was stupid. He couldn't do this now, not at the party she had been planning for weeks. Surely she had been looking forward to this day for a while, now, and what kind of asshole would he be to spring that on her right at the start of it? It would *have* to wait.

She was still hanging on his word, caught up on his every breath. He could feel heat rising up his cheeks. Petulant, Sasuke stuck his hand into the pocket in his cloak and pointedly frowned at the opposite wall. "Nothing. Never mind."

And then she cocked her head at him, and she was smiling, breathing in so brightly, her eyelashes fluttering and- that was not- *not* what Sasuke had wanted for her to react like. What had he even said? He hadn't even said *anything*. He had been trying to work up how to *crush* her, for gods' sake, why was she reacting like he-…? "Let's have fun tonight!" she beamed at him.

It was so frustrating. Just what false details had she come up with in that pink head of hers to get her to react like he was trying to… confess something? They had been talking about Naruto, she had told him he should enjoy himself, and then Sasuke got cold feet from trying to ask her to stop being so in love with him. Was it because he blushed? That wasn't- Sasuke cursed himself for his reactions, whichever one was responsible for doing the complete opposite of what he had intended. Then he cursed Kakashi, just because.

Feeling stifled, Sasuke groped around for a moment for a reason to leave, before remembering that he didn't fucking need one. He turned to head back into the main room where he could hear Naruto laughing.

As he opened the door, he nearly crashed into Ino, who was brandishing a bottle and a couple of small drinking glasses. "Oh, Sasuke-kun! Here, this is for you!" She shoved a glass into his chest so that he had no choice but to grab it, and already pouring him a shot to the top of it. "You too, Sakura- we're all doing a shot with him!"

"Oi, I'm not drinking," Sasuke protested, trying to hand the glass back to her.

"Come on, Sasuke-kun, just one drink!" she goaded, her voice high and girlish.

Such tones never worked on him. "No," he denied.

"Oi- *Oi*! Sasuke!" It was Naruto, and Sasuke looked over in time to see him elbowing his way across the room. He was holding his own glass up high so as to not spill it. "You gunna drink with me?"

“No,” he said flatly, shifting his weight anxiously now that he was brought to the attention of the room.

Making a noise of indignation, Naruto pouted. “Whatever. Bet you’d be a lightweight, anyway!”

Too easily, Sasuke saw the challenge in the throwaway line. He scoffed, shoving his glass into Naruto’s other hand, so that he now had two. “I’m not competing with you on this.”

Naruto’s bottom lip jutted out even further, and Sasuke rolled his eyes at the put-out look. “You’re no fun,” Naruto told him, like Sasuke cared.

“*Someone’s* gunna have to babysit your immature ass,” Sasuke spat back at him.

“We’re *all* babysitting his immature ass, today!” the Inuzuka guy interjected, his arm slinging around Naruto’s shoulders. Sasuke raised an eyebrow at him. “Just take the shot, Naruto; if Uchiha wants to be lame, he can be lame.”

With a scoff, Sasuke attested that he truly did not care what the damn *dog-kid* thought. Naruto, on the other hand, spurted, “Who are you calling lame? You’re *twice* as lame as Sasuke is!”

Sasuke dropped his expression; the last thing he needed was to witness Naruto getting into a my-dick’s-bigger-than-yours competition for him. Sure enough, the Inuzuka puffed his chest out, “I can take Sasuke on with a hand tied behind my back!”

“Sasuke already *has* a missing hand, and would still-”

Yanking on Naruto’s ear, Sasuke cut him off. “Shut up.”

Yelping, Naruto scowled, rubbing at his ear. “You know, I’m on *your* side, here.”

“It’s stupid.”

Cackling, the Inuzuka seemed to be taking it incorrectly as some type of victory. “Uchiha knows I would clobber him. He doesn’t need you sucking his dick in public-”

The vulgar words were more than enough for Sasuke. This idiot, if he really thought he was so big as to be able to take Sasuke on, would learn the hard way how quick such a fight would be. He hadn’t even avoided *eye contact*, the dumbass. It was one of the rare instances where he felt no guilt dropping someone into a genjutsu. It lasted all of two seconds; that’s all it took to show him how unprepared he would be if they were to battle. Inuzuka were meant to track their prey, and, if they were lucky, take them by surprise. They could be strong fighters, sure, and perhaps this one was, but their fighting tactic relied in their ninken.

The Inuzuka fell to his knees, having just felt Sasuke’s cold blade run through his liver then slice across his abdomen, taken off guard by the sudden violence. “I said shut up,” Sasuke spat at him. Several in the room reacted, but the Inuzuka’s large dog was the first to come at him. It was swiftly dealt with by a simple hard glare; animals were too easily affected by the

Sharingan. Just a flare of its power, unlocking the animal's fear, and the dog's tail was between its legs, whimpering away.

The room went silent, but was quickly thereafter ruined when Naruto barked out a laugh, "HA! See? You couldn't even last three seconds!" What part about *shutting up* did he not understand?

But it was a testament to how affected everyone was by Naruto, because after he spoke, a ripple of laughter permeated throughout the room, mimicking him. They had followed his lead in finding the situation humorous rather than despicable. An interesting concept, but it should not have been as surprising as Sasuke found it. He had assumed had Naruto not responded as such, others would have gotten mad. But it seemed Naruto's influence was stronger than Sasuke's ostracization. Ino clapped the Inuzuka on the shoulder, "Good try, Kiba!"

"Kiba, you would not win against Sasuke. It is because he has mastered not only genjutsu, but taijutsu and ninjutsu as well, to a degree that is far more substantial than what you have trained on," Shino Aburame droned on. "Also, he has both a Sharingan and a Rinnegan, two of the most-"

With a growl, Kiba snapped, "Be quiet Shino! It was a cheap shot! He sneak-attacked me!"

"He kicked your ass in three seconds, flat!" Naruto boasted, the two cups of sake still in his hands sloshing around in his animatics. Sasuke's headache flared as Kiba continued on to insist it was a cheap shot and that it didn't count. He couldn't care less. He had negative interest in actually battling anyone, at the moment; he had simply given Kiba his comeuppance for saying such crude things.

"Just take your shot, Naruto," Sasuke scolded him before the pair of instigators got any rowdier than they already were.

With another short, arrogant laugh, Naruto raised the small cup in his right hand, "I'm drinking to Kiba getting his ass kicked!" Well. Naruto would always be Naruto. The room laughed, making the Inuzuka pick himself up off of the ground so that he could grab him by the front.

"How about *I* kick *your* ass-"

But Naruto wasn't listening to him. Instead, he was reacting to the flavor of the sake on his tongue, coughing and spitting out the vile substance. "Wha-What the hell is with this?! Why does it taste like that?!"

Dumbass, Sasuke thought. Did he think poison was supposed to taste good? Kiba, so close to Naruto's front, hopped out of the splash zone. "Don't spit it out! Do you know how expensive this shit is?"

"If it's so expensive, why couldn't they afford to add some sugar or something?!" Naruto argued back.

Ino rushed in, urging the second glass in Naruto's left hand on. "You'll stop tasting it after a few more drinks. Come on, everyone! Drink with him! Happy birthday!" With Ino's instigation, the room followed through with toasting what they had. She practically force-fed Naruto his second one, who drank it uneasily, grimacing the entire way.

Sasuke once again stepped himself backwards into the shadow. The scene was a too rambunctious for him, Ino already attempting to shove a third drink down protesting Naruto's throat. Sakura came forward to scold Ino, and then the pair of them started going at it. Kiba was still bitter about Sasuke and started taking it out on Naruto. Others were chiming in, good naturedly egging both arguments on. He caught Kakashi's eye, who was on the other side of the room already raising an eyebrow at him.

With a scoff, Sasuke slipped back through another door to exit, and found himself on a porch outside overlooking a quaint garden. Much more serene. He felt like he could relax more outside away from the ridiculousness of that group of people.

Would Sasuke have been one of them, had his life not been so shattered by trauma? Carefree, joking, laughing, drinking… When he was a child, he was not a fan of parties, but most of those soirees had been for the adults in his clan. There weren't other kids his age to hang around with, which was why he spent all of his time at Itachi's side for them. Still, even in school he had never been an extrovert. There had always been a core part of him that was exasperated by other people- especially those outside of his own clan.

It was impossible to imagine the person he would have become without the tragedy he had faced. Perhaps he would have been able to open up to a good number of those people, if his clan hadn't been murdered. But would they have accepted him as an Uchiha, a clan that had been ostracized and alienated for the majority of their history in the village? How would the coup have played out? Would the Uchiha have won? Or lost? Either way, would the outcome somehow have made life in the village better for them? For Sasuke, himself?

There was no way of knowing. And it was pointless to think about, anyway.

"Sasuke-san!" came a quiet voice behind him.

He had not heard the door open, which meant that she had to have come from outside, or else some other exit from the estate. It was Hinata, her Byakugan a dead giveaway to her otherwise forgettable demeanor. He grunted at her in response.

She must have been shocked to find him out here, for some reason, because it took her a moment to collect herself. "Th-Thank you very much for coming! I hope you enjoy yourself," she stuttered with a bow, her manner of speech far too proper for someone like Sasuke, who refused to show respect for anyone these days.

She was a Hyuuga of the main branch. Her manners were probably hammered into her from birth. Sasuke had similar teachings from the adults in his own clan. They were all dead now. "Yeah," was all he had to say to that, figuring that that must have been where the difference between their speech patterns was rooted.

After that, silence. He could feel her nerves, as most people typically had around him. Frustrated, Sasuke grimaced at the idea that she was one of those girls who fawned after him, or perhaps used to but now was terrified of him. He couldn't tell, but desperately hoped she was neither. "U-Um, also…" she stammered, and here it was, something stupid, Sasuke was sure- "I wanted to thank you for honoring my sister with a battle. She told me about it, and it was very- very kind of you to battle her in the way you did."

Kind? Sasuke assumed that might have been an applicable adjective for it. He was glad to let go of the dread he had felt worrying for what she wanted to talk to him about. He nodded slowly, "Hanabi is her name, right?"

"Yes." Her hands were clasped over her chest, not unlike the way Sakura did around him, but-

But it was decidedly *not* like the way Sakura did around him, he noticed. Hinata's nerves had nothing to do with him at all. It was shyness, not infatuation. Nor was it fear. Finally spotting this, Sasuke opened his posture to her from how he had been leaning away from her, hunched in over himself. "She wanted to battle the Sharingan. And I was interested in her Byakugan."

Fidgeting in her spot, Hinata explained, "She has a lot of mixed feelings about our clan."

At that, Sasuke couldn't help the humorless laugh that left him. "Don't we all?" He could see it in her eyes, the way she looked to the side like she was remembering a lot of awful things. She may have been from the main branch, and so was Hanabi, but he could see that war within her- the same one that plagued and manipulated Itachi. The one that Sasuke now could hardly make sense of, himself. What was a clan? What was a village, or a country? He wondered how far into that mental turmoil she had ventured. Curious, he probed her, "I'm sorry to hear about Neji."

The words affected her, and Sasuke could tell that he was right to assume how deeply she had sunk into the turmoil. "I-I will forever be grateful to him. I-I-" it took her a while to continue. "I never wanted him to do what he did. He gave his life to protect me. I never wanted him to do that." There was a lot of emotion in her voice, which he could register to a cavernous degree. "B-But if he hadn't-… he saved me, and-and also Naruto-kun by doing so, so I will always be grateful to him!"

She had rushed out the last sentence too quickly, her entire face going cherry red. Sasuke blinked in surprise. Naruto had never told him *that* part of the story. Neji had saved Naruto, as well? "Naruto?" he questioned for her to elaborate.

This, somehow, was harder for her to talk about than Neij's death, which Sasuke found a bit concerning. "Well, I- it was- I-" she swallowed hard. "I-It was supposed to be me- I jumped in front of Naruto-kun, so that he- so then-" Sasuke furrowed his eyebrows, watching her face go redder than must be humanly possible. He wished there was a way he could take back his question, if she was going to react like that. "But Neji took the hit for me instead, even though I didn't want him to! I had just wanted to-"

To protect Naruto? It was hard to understand what she was trying to say with all of the stuttering. She had jumped in front of a lethal blow to protect Naruto, which in turn then

made Neji jump in front of it for her, was what he could gather. From the looks of it, she had been prepared to lose her life to save Naruto. She was another person he had influenced in such a way. Sasuke could understand that, at least. “You want to protect Naruto too, huh?” he considered her.

Steam began to flow from her ears. There was something about that, but Sasuke couldn’t pinpoint it. Naruto had touched so many hearts. He was certain most of the people in this estate right now would similarly lay their lives in front of him. Hinata was one of the few who had actually had the chance to do it. His respect for her grew. He couldn’t even blame her for being embarrassed by it; it was hardly months ago that Sasuke practically felt the same about wanting to do so for Naruto, even if he never let himself get *this* pathetic about it.

Like he was responding to his name, Naruto burst from the doors, stumbling his way over to Sasuke at top energy. “Sasuke!”

He fell practically on top of Sasuke, who caught him quickly, spitting out a well-deserved, “*Dumbass*!” as he did.

Naruto seemed unbothered by his own clumsiness, “Sasuke! They have ramen! Old man Teuchi is here making bowls for everyone! Come get some with me!”

The absurdity smacked Sasuke across the face. “We *just* had his ramen for lunch!”

“I know! This is great! Come get some!”

Absolutely ridiculous. “I have no intention of letting that stuff kill me like you do,” he nagged.

With a childish pout, Naruto grumbled, “Ramen is good for you.”

“No it’s not!”

Naruto was about to say another dumb thing, but he lost whatever it was at the sight of Hinata, who still looked on the verge of exploding. “Hinata?” Naruto said with a cocked head. “What were you guys talking about?”

Hinata was in no state to respond, so Sasuke sighed, “Clan stuff.”

“Ah,” Naruto nodded as though he understood. “That makes sense. It’s probably the only thing you’re good at talking about.” Sasuke glared at him. It had little effect, because he slapped Hinata on the shoulder, who nearly fell over in her state of weakness, “Sorry that Sasuke is such a sullen conversationalist, Hinata!”

“Oi,” Sasuke bit at him, but something drew him to the way Hinata reacted to the physical contact. She looked like…

Sasuke knew too well the difference he felt when Naruto’s hands touched him versus when other people did. The electricity that flowed from Naruto’s hands in stark contrast to the way everyone else’s felt like slime on his body. His bright, warm energy. Suddenly, Hinata reminded him of Sakura again.

As the realization hit him, so did the wave of absurdity. He didn't know this girl, had had zero recollection of her from their academy days or even their genin ones. But the way that she was blushing, holding her hands up to her chest now in *that* telltale way- Sasuke understood, but yet he didn't. Was it a girl thing, to react like that? But she was still different from Sakura, or Ino, or Karin, or any of the other girls Sasuke put up with. Why couldn't she talk?

And Naruto- Naruto was acting so casually about her bizarre reaction. Was this normal for him? Was this an everyday occurrence that was happening when Sasuke was out of the village? Thinking back, Sasuke remembered months ago, way back when, hearing Hinata's name for the first time from him when he admitted he ran into her on the street. And she had offered her estate to throw this birthday party for him. They had to have been close. Did Naruto not realize that she…?

It was clear that he didn't, because he clicked his tongue. "Well, anyway, Hinata, you should come and get a bowl with me instead, if Sasuke's gunna keep being anti-social."

At that, Hinata's body seemed to freeze up. Images of Sakura flashed before him, and Sasuke could not deny the surge of anger that bubbled in his stomach. It made no sense. He had battled many women before; he refused to believe they were all like this. Who was that girl that was on Lee and Neji's team? Or Temari. It was hard to picture Temari getting this ridiculous over someone. Neither could he see it from the likes of the fifth Hokage, nor what he remembered of his own mother.

There had been numerous respectable girls in the Uchiha clan, all of them immensely talented and not remotely likely to be this embarrassing. He had been young, back then, but he refused to believe such weakness could be in his bloodline.

Fed up with her- just when he had started to like her- Sasuke scoffed and already began walking inside. "Whatever. I'll just eat something else with you instead."

He couldn't pinpoint why, but the way Naruto had given out a celebratory whoop before catching up to him was rather satisfying.

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Naruto was drunk.

It was a fact that Sasuke had been quick to pick up on, but very slow on how to deal with. It had started small; Sasuke could see it in the slight daze to his eyes, and perhaps he was a tad louder than usual. Between Sasuke and Sakura, he had been easy to deal with at that stage.

But then Kakashi made the announcement. Naruto was officially a chunin for a grand total of twenty-three seconds. It had clearly been a planned occasion, because the instant the words were said, Iruka slapped down a jonin recommendation document in front of him, and Kakashi already had a pen in his hand to sign it. So Naruto made jonin, which required him, per everyone else in the room, to have another five cups of sake minimum.

There didn't seem to be much to do about it; he was quite clearly happy, celebrating his birthday and his new status as a jonin, laughing with every other person in the room and being the most ridiculous version of himself that Sasuke had ever seen. He for sure had reached a new level of annoying. But Sasuke couldn't chide him for it, because he didn't want to intrude on the fun he was having. Not when it was so clearly deserved.

Sasuke had been trying all night to find new quiet hiding spots, but it had become pointless. Naruto always found him as soon as he was finished with whatever distraction Sasuke had left him with, regardless of how engrossed Naruto had seemed at the time. The clinginess was nothing new; if they were alone, Sasuke would have had no qualms. But wherever Naruto went, so did the party. Sasuke had no idea how to navigate this particular world. The others were awkward with him, and he right back to them, unless Naruto held their attention in specific ways that allowed Sasuke to fall into his shadow.

It was getting late, with a lot of the daytime attendees filing out. The younger kids, like Konohamaru, were of the first to leave, not being of an age to partake in the drinking like the rest. A few of the older ones, like the Raikage and his brother, the Hachibi jinchuuriki, said their goodbyes due to having to work the next morning. It was mainly those of their own age hanging around, many of them quite as drunk as Naruto was. Kakashi was still there, conversing with a few remaining older attendees. Tsunade and her assistant were with the younger kids, no stranger to alcohol.

Ino was the biggest instigator of the drinking, but she wasn't the only one hand-feeding Naruto his drinks. Kiba and that girl from Lee and Neji's team- Sasuke learned her name was Tenten. And Sai, Sai was doing his worst, egging Naruto into drinking more and more in that sly way Sasuke had learned of him earlier. Naruto was too easy of a target for him.

They were playing some dumb drinking game that Sasuke chose to sit back on. He was grateful that it kept Naruto's attention for the longest chunk of time, yet, and he was able to hide away in the corner. He found that if he left the room, Naruto's inner tracking buzzer that

he apparently had on him would go off, and he'd come looking for him. But if he stayed in Naruto's peripherals, he could be as antisocial as he wanted.

There wasn't much for him to do from his corner except watch what was going on, which wasn't too bad of a pastime. From the distance, it was easier to avoid being beset by the annoyances. He eyed those playing the game with Naruto. Kiba, the Akimichi one called Choji, Lee (though he was barred from drinking alcohol by all others in the group, for some reason), Tenten, Sai, Temari and Kankuro. Ino had managed to subdue Sakura from her nagging and got her to join the game, as well. The fifth Hokage was also playing, abysmally bad at the game, which resulted in her becoming perhaps the drunkest of the bunch. Sasuke had learned nearly all of their names tonight, something he had never bothered with before.

On the other side of the room were the aforementioned older attendees. Kakashi, Iruka, Gai, and a woman Sasuke assumed was a jonin group leader of one of the other teams from their genin days. They were enjoying themselves, too, rosy cheeks accompanying the glasses of liquor they were holding. Sasuke was perturbed to see Kakashi drinking, but that group seemed better at controlling themselves than those playing the game.

There were a few not participating. Shikamaru was in an armchair, looking as bored as always. Tsunade's assistant was next standing to her as she played the game, struggling to hold the weight of both the pig in her arms and Tsunade's reputation. Hinata was in a close position, standing just outside of the group to be both present and isolated. Sasuke squinted at the way she always seemed to have an eye on Naruto.

Worse, though, was Gaara.

He was sitting on the middle of the couch, observing the room just as Sasuke was. They shared a moment of eye contact, the dislike radiating between them, then they both found other things to look at. Whatever. Sasuke couldn't help noticing that Gaara was not drinking either, and was also carefully monitoring Naruto while trying to avoid being dragged into the center of attention with him. Unlike Sasuke, though, Gaara had no reason to avoid the spotlight.

The game seemed to end with Naruto's wail of defeat, Kiba sounding far too pleased by it, more than likely still fueled by his desire to cover up his earlier embarrassment. "I'm gunna go sit down," Naruto slurred, sulking at having lost. He was swaying in a way that had Sasuke's instinct to rush to his side to steady him go off, but he ignored it. Naruto was fine, just drunk. With a hiccup, Naruto sat down on the couch.

Next to Gaara. Despite himself, Sasuke's stare fixated on the sight, Naruto stretching his arms out wide over the top of the sofa and slinking down. Gaara hadn't reacted, but Sasuke couldn't help the way his eyes flickered between both of their faces. Gaara had his attention on Naruto, his face expressionless except for a certain softness. Naruto's head lolled back onto the couch, the alcohol clearly affecting him.

The group at the table they were playing their game on protested his departure. Naruto waved a careless hand at them. "No, no, I'mma jus'- jus' gunna relax for a minute. I'mma hang out with-" he looked to his right, making sense of the person he was sitting next to, "with Gaara! Yeah, I'mma talk to Gaara." And then he was grabbing Gaara by the shoulder with the arm

that was already hovering around him on the head of the couch. Something sparked in Sasuke's chest, a sense of urgency that made no sense in the situation. "And Sasuke- where's Sas-?" he looked around frantically for a moment until he caught sight of Sasuke. "Oh! Sasuke!" his arm left Gaara's shoulders and he was attempting to stand up again.

Attempt was the word for it. As soon as he stood, his dizziness got the better of him and he began to fall forward. Sasuke watched in slow motion- when did his Sharingan activate?- as Gaara, so close to him, instinctually reached out to catch him, his hand going straight to the middle of Naruto's chest-

Sasuke caught him the rest of the way. The sight of Gaara's hand splayed out over Naruto's chest, now permanently ingrained in his memory with the Sharingan, had spurred him into action. Gaara had not been quick enough to wholly catch him from knocking himself out on the edge of the coffee table. "Oi, dumbass," Sasuke scolded him.

And Naruto was giggling, because of course he was. He could have given himself a damn concussion. "Haha! I'm so dizzy. The room is spinning," he chuckled, and then he hiccupped, which only made him laugh louder.

"You're just as much of a hindrance when you're drunk as I thought you'd be!" Sakura bickered.

"No, I like him like this!" Ino insisted

"I agree!" Sai chimed. "He's quite amusing."

"He's more annoying than usual," Shikamaru groaned.

Sasuke felt Naruto's body tremble. "Is standing supposed to be this hard?" he asked, his question aimed at Sasuke for some reason.

With an annoyed huff, Sasuke guided him roughly back to the couch. "Then sit back down, dumbass."

Too late, he noticed that he had seated Naruto down right next to Gaara again. He frowned to himself wondering what there was to do about that, then why there had to be something to do about it, anyway. Naruto could sit wherever he wanted, and the seat directly under his ass was the best option for his current state. Figuring there was no reason for Sasuke to be this close to the center of the room anymore, Sasuke straightened himself up to go back to his corner, but he met resistance. Naruto had a grip on his sleeve, and tugged him too gently for it to have been a conscious move. Well. There was space next to him, so Sasuke sat.

There wasn't as much room for him as he thought, but mainly because of how spread-out Naruto was. Even though Sasuke was leaning on the arm of the couch, Naruto was pressed along his right side from shoulder to ankle. Assessing the situation, he could spot that Gaara was in the same situation, except that he had plenty of room to move over on his right side. He had to have been aware of it, and yet he did not move.

Kiba sat down on the other side of the couch, and then Gaara had an excuse to not move. Sasuke scowled at him, but it went unnoticed.

Tsunade was boasting, a whole bottle of sake in her hand, "You're still young! You'll grow out of being such a lightweight! Drink more now and your body will learn to get used to it."

Thinking back to the amount of alcohol Sasuke had witnessed Naruto consume (and that's not to mention the amount that he *hadn't* witnessed), he could not fathom how she could consider him a lightweight. "Oi, Tsunade-sama," Kakashi called out to her. "Maybe you shouldn't be teaching the kids to become alcoholics."

She glowered across the room. "This bunch is all old enough now," she waved defensively. "And they've all been through enough that they deserve to have some fun."

"Godaime-sama," Iruka laughed nervously, his hands up in front of him to placate her. "Kakashi is quite right! They shouldn't be learning that kind of recklessness with alcohol. Remember the ninja-"

"I'm familiar with the ninja prohibitions," she attested bitterly. She made her way across the room to continue the conversation, leaving the rest of them to tune her out as she began berating the adults about how boring they were.

Hand on her hip, Ino asked the group, "What are the ninja prohibitions?"

"Guy-sensei has told me that it is one of the Shinobi Codes of Conduct," Lee explained. "A shinobi must not overindulge in the vices of alcohol, women, or money. They are distractions, and you must not let them hinder on your reputation as a ninja!"

With more laughter, Naruto stirred out of his stupor on Sasuke's shoulder. "Ero-Sennin indulged in all three every day of his life, and he was one of the greatest ninja there ever was!"

"Just because *he* could do it doesn't mean *you* can," Sakura reminded him sternly.

With a bark-like laugh, Kiba sat forward, "Ha! Like he could *get* women!"

With the way Naruto reacted, it was hard to tell he had been on the verge of passing out moments before. He leaned across Gaara's lap to shake a fist in Kiba's face. "Yeah? And where's *your* group of fawning girls, huh?"

Sitting back as though unaffected, Kiba sniggered, "I've got my own sources."

"Akamaru doesn't count," Naruto retorted.

"Akamaru's a boy!" Kiba responded, as if *that* was what was the most damaging about Naruto's jab.

Sasuke was already perturbed by the dumb conversation. He didn't much give a shit about the topic of the fight, as Naruto and Kiba seemed to fight about every little thing. That must be their favorite way to interact with each other. But Naruto was drunk, and was bound to be

extra stupid about it. Sure enough, his fixation on kissing made itself known. “You probably learned how to kiss from him too, huh? All gross and slobbery.”

Face tinting red, Kiba only got louder, “Yeah, and you’d just be so great at kissing with all of your experience!”

Now *this* was a conversation topic that Sasuke *did* mind. He felt his own palms go sweaty. Naruto only huffed though, his bottom lip jutting out as he crossed both his arms and legs. “I happen to know from experience that I’m a *very* good kisser!”

“Ugh, can we *not* have this conversation?” Shikamaru groaned. “I’d rather not think about any of you guys kissing people.”

But he seemed to be in the minority. A ripple of confusion settled through the crowd. “What’s your basis on that, Naruto?” Ino queried him.

And Sasuke’s body felt like it was going cold. Simultaneously, Naruto’s body along his own was scalding. The effect of the contrasting temperatures was making him sweat. Naruto, though, did not seem so affected. He did have a little more color to his cheeks than the alcohol had given him moments ago, though. “A few things,” he shrugged bashfully.

“Bullshit!” Kiba shouted.

Matching Kiba’s argumentative tone, Naruto leaned back over Gaara to get in his face, “Wanna find out?!”

“Where is this going?” Ino’s voice waivered.

Grip clutching Naruto’s jacket, Kiba sneered back, “Maybe I do, huh? And I’ll prove to everyone how bad of a kisser you are!”

“Please don’t,” Shikamaru implored loudly above their shouting.

They did. Or, well, Naruto did, hand grabbing the back of Kiba’s head and pulling him in, leaning across Gaara’s lap to place a firm kiss to Kiba’s lips. Sasuke’s eye twitched at the bizarre sight. The entire room froze, everyone bewildered as to what they were witnessing. Sasuke could see in the wideness of Kiba’s eyes that he was fully unprepared for Naruto to go so far for their argument. It brought Sasuke back to their first fully intended kiss. Arguing about kissing, and then kissing. He had no idea what to make of the situation.

The kiss did not last very long. Naruto pulled back, an extremely puzzled look on his face. The room was still immobile, until Kiba shouted an incredibly agonized, “*What the fuck*!?” Then everyone began at once.

Kiba was wiping his mouth, shouting expletives at Naruto. Ino was cheering them on, loudly telling them to do it again, joined in by excited cooing from Tenten and awed exclamations from Choji. Temari gave a low whistle while Kankuro gawked. Sakura was screaming at Naruto to explain what he was doing. Shikamaru was still frozen with torment of the sight.

Hinata looked like both of her eyes were about to pop right out of her skull. Gaara lost all of the color in his complexion from what had just transpired in his lap.

For his part, Naruto had taken three seconds to blink past a thought in his head, before turning back to Kiba. “Wait. That wasn’t right. Do it again.”

“Do it a-” Kiba sputtered, eyes wild. “No! Are you *deranged*?! Why would we do it again!?”

More insistent now, Naruto leaned over again. “It wasn’t right! It was wrong! Kiss me again!”

“*Of course* it was wrong!” Kiba shouted. “Kiss someone else!”

“You should kiss Hinata next!” Ino prompted, her arms to Hinata’s shoulders, who looked on the verge of imploding.

Frantic, Naruto nodded, “Alright! Yeah! I’ll kiss Hinata!”

At Naruto’s words, Hinata promptly fainted. Sakura caught her, yelling an indignant, “*Ino*!”

Hinata’s fainting hardly set Naruto back. “Sakura-chan,” he stood up and tried to go over to her. “Sakura-chan, kiss me! I have to-”

She punched him in the face, her voice going dangerously deep, “What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

Naruto whimpered in his pain, falling flat on the ground. Ino had bounded up to him, lifting him up from his undignified stumble, “I’ll kiss you, Naruto!”

“You will?!” he said incredulously, instantly forgetting the pain he was in. No sooner had she nodded at him did he grab her the same way he had Kiba. He held her kiss longer, and she was giggling into it, apparently more amused than anything. Naruto disconnected. It didn’t seem like kissing Ino solved whatever problem he had from Kiba. “Something’s wrong with me!” he proclaimed to the group.

“Well *that’s* evident!” Shikamaru spat.

Sai leaned close to Naruto. “Do you want to try kissing me, too?”

Naruto spared no second thought. He kissed Sai the same as he had kissed the others, one hard press of their lips, then pulling back and desperately wallowing in whatever concerning thing was running through his head. “This doesn’t make sense!” he whined to himself, eyes wide and disoriented.

Shino raised his hand, “Naruto, I notice you have not yet asked me-”

Naruto’s hysteria cleared completely for him to utter the phrase, “No thank you.”

No one noticed the way Shino’s depression rolled off of him in waves, because Naruto was back to ripping his hair out. Lee patted him on his shoulder. “I do not understand what is

wrong, Naruto, but I will gladly be of any assistance you need!" Naruto took it as sign to kiss him, which only made Shino's despair worse.

Pushing Lee away, Naruto wallowed, "It's getting worse! What's happening to me?! Shikamaru!"

"Don't even think about it."

So he turned then to, "Gaara!" Sasuke clenched his jaw tight. "Gaara, will you kiss me?!" Naruto asked him, to which Gaara went an even paler shade, and Sasuke-

Sasuke had been fine with everyone else. He had been, honestly, just ransacked by confusion and nerves and how bizarre this whole situation was. But his eyes focused on Gaara, who had just swallowed something thick in his throat, then to Naruto, who was still desperately begging Gaara to kiss him. Sasuke- should not care, he shouldn't- Naruto was free to kiss whomever he wanted. It didn't mean anything, because as many kisses as Naruto gave out, it would amount to nothing, it was no threat to Sasuke, because he and Naruto had something that no one else could possibly replicate-

Except Gaara.

This might have been Gaara's first lifetime with Naruto, paling to the history Sasuke's soul had with him, but Gaara had something else, and always would have something else. Sasuke could not replicate what it was like to be a jinchuuriki. Naruto could confine with Sasuke as much of his childhood as he wanted, but if he needed empathy for it, Sasuke could not provide that. What good was having linked souls? It wasn't like either of them had any memories of their past lives. What link Gaara had with Naruto from their trauma was tangible in a way that Sasuke's could not be.

It was Kankuro's sniggering that snapped Sasuke out of his shock. "Yeah, come on Gaara, kiss him," he egged his brother. Temari elbowed him hard in the ribs, and he doubled over.

But Gaara looked too terrified to move, and he lost his chance. Naruto huffed again, his frustration getting the better of him and taking his attention. "I think the alcohol broke my kissing!" he shouted, and Sasuke could let out the breath he had been holding, because he turned away from Gaara.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Kankuro asked, still rubbing his bruised ribs.

"Because every other time I-" and whatever thought had been plaguing him finally hit, because his head snapped around to Sasuke. "Sasuke-" he said, and then he was coming in, honing in on Sasuke without even *asking* like he had done for everyone else.

Panicking, Sasuke brought his hand up with a mere second to spare, palm shoving Naruto's face back, his features squishing from the force of it. "Oi!"

"'Suke," Naruto said through his fingers, putting a ridiculous amount of strength into trying to lean in closer. "'Need you t' kiss me," he insisted.

“I’m not kissing you in front of all of these people, dumbass!” Sasuke spat at him. Naruto continued to try to push his face past Sasuke’s hand, and he really was putting all of his strength into it. Naruto attempted to call his name again, and Sasuke’s arm wasn’t going to hold him back for much longer. Desperately, Sasuke found a jacket across the room to switch places with. Naruto yelped as his face hit the couch at full force. “Dumbass!” Sasuke called him again for good measure.

Growling, Naruto picked his face from off of the couch, twisting his spine to point rudely across the room at Sasuke, giant red handprint on his face. “My kissing is broken! You should care!”

“Why would I care?!” Sasuke jolted to say.

“What do you mean your kissing is ‘*broken*”?!” Kiba finally recovered enough to yell.

Frustrated, Naruto continued to point at Sasuke. “Because I can’t *feel* anything when I kiss you guys. Every time I kiss Sasuke, it feels completely different!” The room went utterly silent. Sasuke’s head rang with Naruto’s last sentence, the truth he had just dropped on everyone out of nowhere. The only one impervious to the dumbfounded quiet was Naruto himself, dense as ever. “Like, my lips are supposed to tingle when we kiss! I’m missing the tingle that’s supposed to be there!”

The electricity. Sasuke knew exactly what Naruto was talking about. How long ago was it now that Sasuke had first felt it? That spar, and then the following morning, stealing that kiss from Naruto as he slept to try to find answers… Electricity. He had thought it was chakra, because he was used to his own lightning nature and that was the closest thing he could use to describe it. Naruto was calling it a *tingle* and Sasuke could understand why. The childish word wasn’t far off.

Ino was the first brave enough to speak. Her voice was level and controlled. “Naruto, what do you mean ‘*every time you kiss Sasuke*’?”

He almost said something. He had opened his mouth to answer her, to explain further, and then finally, *finally*, some common sense wheedled its way through the fog of alcohol in his empty skull. His face went redder than Sasuke had ever seen it. “Uh-… I mean…” was all he managed to make out.

Sasuke shut his eyes, trying to ease the panic he felt. With a slow breath through his nose, finger tapping between his eyebrow to stim the tension between them, he calmed down. It wasn’t like Naruto had said anything *untrue*. And Sasuke wasn’t hiding. No, he was done with hiding, he had made that choice. Thorn in Konoha’s side. He was going to be next to Naruto for the rest of their lives, stuck to him like his shadow, a figure that was always prominently *there* as a reminder of the atrocities the state had caused.

“As in like… besides back at the academy?” Ino continued, the shock in her voice near hysterics.

“‘*Besides* back at the academy’?! You mean they kissed back then?!” Kankuro outdid her tone.

“Yes,” Shino said flatly, sounding incredibly unaffected by all of it. “It was thought to have been an accident at that time, because Naruto had been pushed. But what concerns me now was Sasuke-kun’s earlier statement that he was not going to kiss Naruto ‘in front of all of these people’. This implies that he would have had no issues with kissing Naruto had they been alone.”

Shit. Sasuke cursed himself for his earlier panic induced slip up. Once again, it was not untrue, so Sasuke couldn’t deny it, and why should he deny it anyway? Yeah, he kisses Naruto. What the fuck ever. Why did anyone else even care, anyway? It had nothing to do with them.

“Oh? Are you guys surprised by this?” Sai asked the room, sounding so thinly cheery. Sasuke’s dislike of Sai grew even further.

“*HOW WOULD ANYONE NOT BE*?!” Kiba shouted at him.

Fake smile on his face, Sasuke saw a glimmer of what he could only describe as ‘evil’ under it. “Naruto-kun had spent years chasing after Sasuke-kun. I would think it would be obvious that they were intimate.” Sasuke breathed through his nose again, this time the air coming out quick and hot. Who the hell even was this guy? They had, for all intents and purposes, met each other *tonight*. What the fuck was Naruto talking to him about that he was *so* certain of their relationship together?

At the word ‘intimate’, Naruto stood up quickly from the couch, adrenaline overriding his drunken dizziness. “Wait! No- you guys have got the wrong idea! I just meant- Sasuke and I are-”

“Yeah, I thought it was obvious too,” Choji added, and Sasuke had to do a double take on him. Sasuke couldn’t remember ever having said two words to him in all of their lives.

“No! I wasn’t saying anything like that! I just meant- we just-” Naruto continued to stammer. “I mean, it’s just kissing! It’s not like we- I mean-”

Idiot. “So you admit that you do kiss him?” Sai probed him.

With that, Naruto’s tactic changed. “S-So what?! At least I have experience kissing!” But no one else cared about Naruto’s experience at all.

“I’m going to need five years to process this,” Kiba complained, his head in his hands.

“All things considered, it is actually not as surprising to learn as I had thought it would be,” Shino droned. “That is because with hindsight now, it is clear that Naruto’s obsession with Sasuke had a deeper root in the form of romantic attraction.”

Naruto’s eyes went wide, “O-Oi! Who said anything about-?”

But Lee had grabbed him around his shoulders, “I think that is a beautiful tale of love! Naruto-kun, you should not hide your true feelings for someone! Love is the strongest weapon both on and off the battlefield!”

“L-Love-?!” Naruto stammered. “N-No, we just-”

“Do you not love him, then?” Sai instigated.

“W- I-”

“Hmm, and what about Sasuke-kun? Do you love Naruto?” His fake smile turned to Sasuke, who jolted under the unpleasantry of it.

Naruto clenched his fists, “Of course n-”

At the same time from across the room, Kakashi was standing up quickly, “Okay, I think that’s enough-”

“Obviously,” Sasuke said. The room went silent again.

Sasuke scoffed. How fucking stupid. What a dumb conversation. He was pointedly staring at a spot on the ground some ways off from him, hand on his hip in annoyance. Really, what did it all matter to these people? Why was everyone here so invested in him and Naruto? He couldn’t tell who he was maddest at. Sai, for instigating. Shikamaru, who looked like he had hardly even breathed for minutes now, staring down with wide eyes at his own feet, head in his hand like this information was the worst news he had ever heard. Gaara, whose muscles had all locked up. Naruto, for getting them into this situation. Stupid. They all were.

Obviously he loved Naruto. Kakashi knew, Sai knew, fucking *Choji* knew when Sasuke hadn’t even known his *name* an hour ago… and Orochimaru, the worst person to know, he had also been able to figure it out. Sasuke had apparently never been able to hide it. Naruto had definitely never been able to hide it. Without looking, Sasuke could feel Naruto’s reaction across their bond. His panic ebbing, replaced with something much softer, almost tentative. “Huh?” he questioned in that cautious, hesitant way, little more than a breath.

A feeble wave of frustration tried to consume him, but it was too weak. He continued staring at the spot on the ground far away from everyone else. “The Susanoo is a creation born out of an Uchiha’s love. The only people who can infiltrate the perfect defense are people who are also doused in that same Uchiha’s love. You being able to enter it last week had nothing to do with mixing our chakra,” he chose as an explanation. “I spent years doing everything possible to try to sever our bond. It’s impossible. It’s the only thing I know of that’s stronger than the Susanoo, which means that it has to be love.”

Facts.

When the room remained quiet, Sasuke picked his eyes up off of the ground to glare around at everyone, wondering why the mood had suddenly shifted. He zoned in on Naruto, the only reaction he actually cared about, to find his face just as blank as the tug of the bond suggested he would be. Furrowing his eyebrows, he tried to study the expression. Naruto was drunk, but he seemed to have a moment of clarity about him that contrasted his confusion. Typical. He hadn’t expected Naruto to have fully put it to words, anyway. His heart must have, because Sasuke felt it on many occasions in the past. Every time they curled around each other on his bed. Or in the bath in Suna. Or in the Forest of Death during the Chunin exams, tied at the

hip together for safety. Or in the blizzard, clutching Sasuke into his chest, their knees soaked from kneeling in the snow. Or at their waterfall, ignoring the world.

Naruto worked on instinct. He rarely put any thought into his actions or the actions of others. It was the complete opposite, as he always was, of Sasuke, who overthought every minuscule movement of both himself and everyone around him. Combined with his childhood of abandonment, the absence of any form of love during his early stages of life, he did not have any firm understanding of the concept of it outside of friendship. At least, in the sense of putting it to actual words. The different levels of love were foreign to him, even if he had unknowingly been experiencing it for a while by this point. He certainly had given nothing but love to Sasuke for years, now, completely oblivious to the hidden motives of his own actions.

"That was the most beautiful thing I've ever heard," a voice spoke, and Sasuke glared at its owner, Tenten.

Her girlish opinion on it sparked an unrest with Sasuke. What was that even supposed to mean? Sasuke had only been stating facts, because that was all he had access to do. It wasn't meant to be- what? Romantic? Certainly not 'beautiful'. Had they all taken it as some type of grand confession? A quick look at all of the flushed cheeks around the room confirmed that they had. Gross.

Ino mumbled, "S-So, Sasuke-kun is…"

Ugh. He was *what*, exactly? Their reactions were pissing him off. "Okay, that's enough of that," Kakashi interjected here, waving airily toward the group, making sure to stand in front of Sasuke to grab everyone's attention. "Perhaps we should start winding down now. It's getting rather late!"

Good. Sasuke was over this dumb party. Only for Naruto would he put himself through this. Next year, Sasuke was going to-

A head of pink hair disappeared around the corner of a hallway, and what had just happened finally settled into him. The guilt of having not spared her a second thought festered low in his stomach. But then again, why should he have? Other people in the room were talking, trying to mask the awkward tension they were all subjected to, which gave Kakashi an ample cover to say out of the corner of his mouth, "I had not expected you to come through on my request so publicly."

He did not need Kakashi to make this worse for him. "I didn't *plan* that."

"I can tell."

Fuck. With gritted teeth, Sasuke conceded, "I'll go find her."

"No," Kakashi's hand halted his movement. "Let me talk to her first. She probably wouldn't want you to see her upset. And you should go deal with that one."

‘*That one’* referred to Naruto, who was still standing stock-still in the middle of the room. The hand out in front of him, which had once been clenched with anxiety, was much looser now, having lost all of the fire in it. Naruto must have forgotten to put it away. Sasuke was at a loss as to what Kakashi expected him to do, and he lost his chance to ask, because Kakashi left swiftly after saying it. What was there for Sasuke to do for him? He had already said what he had said, which was nothing but the truth. And it hadn’t been a secret. If Naruto had not been intuitive enough to have figured it out on his own over time, how was that Sasuke’s fault?

But his hesitation was for nothing. Eye contact with Naruto was all that was needed. It was their bond, Sasuke realized. They were able to read each other, find the answers that no one else had access to within it. He could feel the familiar tug of Naruto imploring him, searching through wordless, actionless measures for the affirmations that he needed to sort his own thoughts out. Sasuke let him take.

Naruto’s smile began to widen. Dopey, exuberant. Full and bright and too much then for Sasuke to handle. With a scoff, Sasuke broke their eye contact, actively ignoring the heat that was rising to his own cheeks. He didn’t need Naruto acting stupid about this. He found his exit through a large window that opened up to the front porch of the estate, and hid himself around the corner, out of view from the people of his past.

The night was ebbing on cold, now that it was mid-October. But the nipping wind did wonders to give him a fresh breath of air. The party had been stifling. Here, alone, he could breathe, not quite safe enough to drop his walls, but at least enough for his shoulders to relax.

He wasn’t alone for long, which he knew he wouldn’t be. He had felt Naruto following him the moment Sasuke had turned on his heel.

The kiss shouldn’t have surprised him, but it did. Sudden and firm, Naruto had his hands to Sasuke’s cheek to hold him in place. The jolt of surprise mixed with the one of pleasure, the electricity of the kiss. But they were out of sight, and Sasuke could not sense that anyone else had been watching them. Just as Sasuke was about to relax into it, Naruto pulled back.

“Just checking,” he said, the gravel in his voice reaching through to Sasuke’s bones. Of course he was. Sasuke rolled his eyes, turning away from him to lean against the railings of the porch. The moon was bright tonight, though not quite full. Naruto came over to lean next to him, choosing to lean his back against the rails instead so that he could attempt better access to Sasuke’s face. “So you- um. D’you think that we…”

He was still drunk. “Shut up,” Sasuke told him. It was a testament to how often he told Naruto to do that, because Naruto did not react as put-out as he once would have. Instead he waited for Sasuke to talk, chewing his bottom lip, more out of curiosity than any kind of nerves. “Nothing’s changed,” Sasuke ensured.

It was imperative for Sasuke to tell him that. Nothing had changed between them. Sasuke had not given any kind of confession inside. What he had said were the facts, the truth that they had already been living for the past few months. Or the past year. For their whole lives, probably, even if they hadn’t figured it out at that point. Even if it was a new realization to Naruto, the concept itself was anything but.

Naruto's leg was bouncing with his restless energy. His excitement permeated all of the surrounding air, enveloping Sasuke. "Right!" he chirped, having understood Sasuke's meaning quicker than expected. Maybe there was something to being drunk that enhanced the efficiency of their bond, made Naruto more sensitive to such things. It was certainly something, because he began to back up. "Don't stay outside too long. It's getting cold."

Sasuke hummed at him, and Naruto went back inside. There was nothing for Sasuke to do but admire how Naruto had known that Sasuke wanted to be alone. And that he was able to trust that Sasuke was not going to disappear on him. He would have assumed the opposite would have happened had he been given the chance to try to predict it. Naruto was clingy, especially tonight.

He had another minute to himself, which he enjoyed. His thoughts were trying to sort themselves out. This would be something to deal with that he had not been anticipating, everyone now knowing. Truthfully, Sasuke would have preferred to keep things as they had been. Not a secret, but definitely not some big announcement. He would have favored letting people come to figure it out on their own one by one. That would have kept it lowkey. Thankfully the only people here were the ones closest to Naruto. But from now on, word would get out.

There was still Sakura that he had to contend to, as well. He doubted there was a protocol for how to deal with such a situation. With a groan to himself, he figured that he owed it to her to try to talk to her as soon as possible. Tonight, if he could.

His mental cleaning was cut short by someone else's presence. He clicked his tongue, feeling his walls come up to defend himself. "What?" he spat, revealing that he knew he was being watched.

Gaara stayed quiet.

Sasuke didn't want to deal with him, so he went back to staring out into the impeccable landscaping work of the Hyuuga estate. He leaned against his railing, thoughts now circling around his desire for Gaara to leave. He didn't. Instead, Gaara came closer. He did not lean with him, nor did he face away from Sasuke. It was a little unnerving, how straight he stood. "It must have been hard for you to watch him kiss all of those people."

What the fuck was he on about? Despite how emotionally drained he felt, Sasuke's temper began to simmer. "Naruto can do what he wants."

Gaara was quiet for another moment after that. Really. What did he expect? Sasuke had no claim to Naruto's autonomy. The idea of holding such a cumbersome thing sounded exhausting. Maybe Gaara was unaware that it was impossible to do that to people. It was his lesson to learn. To parallel it, Sasuke likened it to the fact that he could not control Gaara to make him leave, either, despite how much he wished it. People would do what they wanted to do, and that was that. Changing the topic, Gaara admitted, "I spoke to him back in Suna."

That much Sasuke had gathered. "He was there for two weeks."

Not outwardly affected by Sasuke's rudeness, as he probably expected it, Gaara continued, "He's gone farther for you than you know of." Farther than Sasuke knew of? Did Gaara think Sasuke was unaware of the lengths Naruto had reached for him? Exactly one year ago, he had nearly died by Sasuke's own hand, solely for the sake of not leaving him alone in death. What would *Gaara* know of that? He had been under the Tsukuyomi like the rest of the world. "He begged to the council to clear your name."

For the first time, Sasuke snapped his head around to look at Gaara's face. Emotionless as ever, but determined. He had no reason to lie.

"He found out that we still had a warrant out for your arrest." Did he? It must not have been easy for Gaara to hide after Sasuke made a rather public appearance. "He had me call a meeting. Demanded it to happen right then. I assumed that he was going to start with some grand speech. Instead, he got down on his knees and lowered his head for you." Sasuke's arm twitched with the weight of holding himself up on the railing. "I am told it's not the first time he has done such a thing for you. Back then, he did the same to the Raikage, just before the Kage Summit you infiltrated. He learned of Kumo's intent to execute you for capturing their jinchuuriki, and got down in the snow to beg for your life."

Was that true? Had Naruto abandoned his pride and done such a thing for him? Thrown away the concept of being perceived as pathetic? Did he consider Sasuke's protection so important that he needed to reach beyond their personal connection and change the minds of others for him?

"And last week," Gaara had more to hammer into him, knocking hard through the walls Sasuke desperately tried to keep up, "before the final exams, he went to all of the Kage and did the same. He knew that Wind was not the only country that still had warrants out for your arrest."

Sasuke could hardly wrap his head around it. When had Naruto done that? He must have had the time; Sasuke had only seen him barely twenty minutes before their exam. But he had never mentioned, not at any point in the Blizzard Dimension, didn't give any hint of such an event having happened at their waterfall. And how long had it been since they left Suna? He had never given Sasuke even an inkling. Sasuke would have picked up on it if he had; Naruto was not known for his tact.

He realized a bit late that he was showing too much vulnerability for his present company. Gritting his teeth, Sasuke looked forward again. He was curious, though, and could not deny himself of answers. "And how did they react," he said, not questioned.

"I know that back at the Summit, the Raikage had outright denied him," Gaara's voice was as unaffected as ever, which pissed Sasuke off, because he wasn't sure if his own voice had been the same. He already knew that the Raikage would not have acted kindly at all in that moment. "But last week, everyone was more subdued. It was decided that the outcome of your test would determine your judgement, though we did not indicate to him what exactly your test was," Sasuke clenched his jaw, having not lost any rage about that ordeal yet. "I am unaware of how other countries have judged you based on the events that happened. As for Kumo, I know that the Raikage and the Hachibi have remained in Konoha for the week, so I assume they have to wait until they get back to their village to have that meeting. Earlier

today, I witnessed Naruto reinstate his case to the Raikage. Based on that conversation, I am certain they will clear you."

Even *today*, Naruto had done such a thing right under Sasuke's nose? A surge of foolishness coursed through him at the thought, that he could have been completely unaware that Naruto was arguing for him without him knowing. Naruto was fighting his battles for him, without consulting first whether that was something Sasuke wanted him to do or not-

Sasuke realized that that was *exactly* why Naruto had not told him. Sasuke would win no debates for his own freedom. He did not have the ability to lay down his pride for himself in such a way. Naruto knew this. He also knew that, whether Sasuke wanted him to do it or not, he would not be truly safe without it. Of course Sasuke could handle himself on his own, that fact was blatant. Sasuke had never once been scared to go where he pleased. But he always had to disguise himself.

And perhaps it was a way to save Konoha as well, because Naruto also found that important. Sasuke was considered Konoha's responsibility. If he was found mingling around in countries that had warrants out for him, even if he was doing something completely innocent, it would be seen as Konoha's negligence. More war could be had because of it. The precious alliance between them would come into question. Not wanting to make himself more vulnerable by opening up that scenario in his head, Sasuke goaded another question that was eating away at him. "And Suna?"

"Your name was cleared three hours before you two left the village."

That long ago, huh? "That must have been hard for you," he chose his words, carefully matching them to Gaara's from earlier.

It was the first crack of expression Sasuke saw on him. The nuance of the repeated words was not lost. If he was angry about it, he set it aside. "It was actually much easier than I thought it would be. He's very compelling."

Sasuke knew it too well. He almost laughed, but he sobered himself. "I'm surprised you had it in you to choose him over your country, for once."

"As a Kage, it is my job to put my country before my personal will," Gaara echoed himself from that night back in Suna. "One day, that will be Naruto's job, as well."

There was a fear that stirred from deep within him, but he shoved it down. "Naruto understands better than you do about what it truly means to be a Kage," he explained, unable to hide his anger now. "Countries are arbitrary. Villages aren't real."

"Does he?" Gaara challenged. "Or are you projecting that onto him?"

Sasuke's anger made his thoughts too wild for him to have a response.

Walking away, Gaara left him. "Naruto can do what he wants," he parroted.

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24

Chapter Notes

....guys..... this is the last chapter.....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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He hadn't meant to run into Sakura. Too restless, Sasuke had been trying to blow off the steam of Gaara's parting words by walking, hoping the flawless landscaping of the Hyuuga estate might offer his anger some reprieve. Despite Kakashi's insistence on settling down, Naruto's mood had only gotten brighter, and he held the center of attention with his liveliness once again. Sasuke had to get away from the sound of it through the wall for a moment.

Sakura was sitting by a small water feature like a miniature pond, the surface covered with water lilies. They were not in bloom, but she had found a withered flower, and was performing some type of reparative jutsu on it. Sasuke assumed it was some type of medical technique she learned in her training under Tsunade. Surely the flower was far too dead for it to work completely.

She did not sense him coming. Sasuke had a light footstep, and she was no sensory ninja. He contemplated avoiding her, as he wasn't in a great headspace to have the conversation that they needed to, but he didn't. She jumped slightly when he sat down next to her on the stone ground surrounding the water.

It didn't seem like she was prepared to talk to him. For once, he started the dialog. "You were right." Feeling that her terror might not subdue at all for this conversation, Sasuke continued, "Drunk Naruto is a nightmare."

A glitter of light fell from the bridge of her nose, splashing down onto her flower. He was concerned for a moment that she would not respond. What would he do then? Sasuke was not good at this. He had no clue what he was doing; he could hardly even make sense of *why* she was reacting like this let alone how to fix it. He had only just come to terms with the fact that maybe he had some semblance of responsibility as a friend to her to attempt to help her through this. But with enough of both of their silences, Sakura was able to formulate her words. "Y-Yeah, it's like it helps him widen the nozzle on the supply of nuisance that usually only trickles out."

That was an accurate analysis. Sasuke could sense that he didn't need to respond again: doing so would not have been in Sakura's best interest. He could see that she was working up something important to say.

“You know, the only times I can ever have an engaging conversation with you is when we’re talking about him. I just noticed that now.” That wasn’t something Sasuke had ever considered, but looking back, it held merit. “H-He’s your safe spot. I must have known it subconsciously, because I always knew that bringing him up would get you to talk to me, but I-I just… I don’t know. I just couldn’t connect the dots, I guess. I must be really stupid, huh?”

It left a bad taste in Sasuke’s mouth to hear her speak of herself like that. Maybe there might have been some truth to it, when the facts were laid out like that. Sasuke couldn’t imagine being in her position and having not discerned the true nature of him and Naruto. If Kakashi had been able to, Sasuke would have, too. But he didn’t think the friendly thing to do would be to agree with her calling herself stupid, so instead, he asked, “Sakura, do you know about the dangers of wielding the Mangekyou?”

The question rocked her a little. She responded automatically like she had reverted back to their academy days as the smart girl graduating second in their class, though seemed confused at having been placed there again now, “It takes an incredibly taxing amount of chakra.”

He hummed affirmatively, but pivoted her answer, “I’m talking about another price to pay for it. Wielding the Mangekyou makes the user go blind.”

She appeared to have not been aware. “Blind?”

He saw where her immediate concern went. “I had taken my brother’s eyes in order to rid myself of that detriment. But before that, yes, I had been going blind. My brother himself had little eyesight by the end of his life. By implanting another Sharingan, I no longer need to worry about such a thing happening. That’s why it’s called ‘Eternal’ Mangekyou, because it no longer has a limit to its use.”

“I-I never knew… So you have Itachi’s…?”

But that wasn’t what he was trying to tell her. Steering back on track, Sasuke asked her another question. “Do you know what makes the Sharingan evolve?”

“Love.” She knew that answer. Sasuke had a suspicion that she had figured it out long before he had made the connection to it back inside at the party.

“The Uchiha evolve our eyes as weapons for the purpose of protecting those we love. It gives us tremendous power. If one loves strong enough and becomes desperate enough to protect that love, they eventually wield the Mangekyou. In return for using that power, for protecting our love, we become blind.”

Judging by the way her eyes watered again, he did not need to explain it to her further, why he had chosen this specific detail to explain to her now.

“You don’t deserve to hurt because of me any more than you already have,” he added with urgency. When she blinked, her lashes stuck together with wetness. “Thank you for all you have done for me.”

At this, she protested. “I had given up on you. Naruto never did. I-I keep thinking about what I had tried to do to you, and I-…”

“Not all of us can be as stubborn as Naruto,” he reminded her. “I don’t blame you for what you tried to do, nor do I hold any grudge. You didn’t want to leave Naruto with the burden of killing me. I choose to appreciate that in the memory.”

She shook her head, “It was selfish.”

Frowning, Sasuke did not deny it. “Maybe. But I don’t see anything inherently wrong with being selfish. And what you have done for me since then far overshadows the real error in your decision to kill me.” She seemed confused, so he explained, “You’ve confronted both yourself and others about the wrongdoings done against me and my clan. You have no need to be helping with the museum as much as you are. I am grateful to you for doing that, not for me, but because you can see that it is the right thing to do.”

Her fingers began to crush the flower still in her hand, and whatever life she had brought back to it crumbled. “We had never been told about it, growing up. I think that’s what bothers me the most. Like how we had never been told why we couldn’t associate with Naruto. We all knew what happened to your clan, but hadn’t been told why, just the lies about your brother having been responsible. We were told it was because he had gone crazy. When I learned the whole story, everything about you made sense. And I was angry.”

“Thank you, Sakura,” he said, and he meant it. She crushed the flower in her hand further. “You are one of the most important people in my life.”

Her eyes held the realization in them that that was all she was ever going to be. One of. He could see her struggle with it, but there wasn’t anything else he could do for her, now. It was in her hands. It was her responsibility to find its place in her life. There was a surprising level of pain that he felt on behalf of her, cementing his own realization about his feelings. He did have love for her. He did not like seeing her so upset, nor did he like being the one to have upset her.

From inside the building, they heard a large crash, followed by a chorus of people shouting Naruto’s name. The sound of it broke through Sakura’s emotions, and she let out a tick of annoyance. “Tell me he broke something.”

Her response coaxed a laugh out of him. “Our fault for abandoning our position as babysitters for five minutes.” Hesitantly, she smiled weakly at him. She still needed time alone, he could tell, so he stood up. “I’ll go reign him in.”

As he was leaving, he noticed that Sakura set the flower down back into the water, where it sank straight to the bottom.

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By the time Sasuke had made it back inside, Kakashi had already scolded Naruto for having knocked over the platter of remaining food. While Naruto sulked, Kakashi murmured to Sasuke, “You should probably take him home before he becomes any more destructive. *Do*

try to stop him from performing jutsu. It can be really dangerous, especially considering his power," and Sasuke didn't need to be told twice.

"Oi. Dumbass. We're leaving," he called out. For a moment, Naruto turned a pout to him, but the expression disappeared, and then his bottom lip was jutting out in a different way. He was thinking something nefarious, Sasuke could tell. Before the idiot drunkenly said it loud enough for the entire room, Sasuke had him by the ear.

At Naruto's protest, Sasuke had to let him go so that he could at least say goodbye to everyone. But only because it was his birthday. He stood by the front door, tapping his foot as he waited. "Did you have a fun night, Sasuke-kun?" came a voice at Sasuke's right.

Sai. Sasuke squinted at him. He had a better sense of the guy, now. He turned his shoulders to face him and lowered his voice. "No."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Sai replied brightly without missing a beat. The fact that he wasn't intimidated by Sasuke was annoying. "Naruto did, at least. We should try not to ruin his mood, you think? Though I'm sure once he's alone with you, everything will turn out fine."

Sasuke did not want to play his game. "What are you doing?" he asked, his voice like stone.

Still smiling, Sai continued to toy with him, "I just think that people should be honest about their feelings."

Well, if that's what he wanted. "Keep your nose out of my business," he threatened. "It's been a while since my blade has seen real blood. Do not equate that with me being placated."

"Ah, see?" Sai responded. "Much better when we're open and honest with each other. I still have trouble understanding the finer points of emotions. That's one of the reasons why I'm so fond of Naruto. He's an open book."

Sasuke wasn't a fan of this person discerning Naruto in such a way. "What's your point?" he urged him to get it over with.

"Naruto was the one who taught me how important emotions were. If it wasn't for him, I'd have never left Danzo's militia. Though, I guess I would have had no choice, thanks to you, huh!" he added on in an even cheerier tone that Sasuke did not approve of. He fell back on track. "I've watched Naruto go through a plethora of emotions. Highs. Lows." He finally opened his cold eyes for Sasuke. He did not seem to fear genjutsu. "*Extreme* lows."

It finally clicked. He was another one whose life had been severely altered for the better thanks to Naruto. For a moment, Sasuke wasn't sure he had pinned this guy's intentions at all yet, still. All Sasuke knew of his past was that he had been a soldier forced to abandon every emotion for his childhood. Sasuke had tried to do that same thing of his own choice at one point. But then Sai met Naruto, and Naruto did to him what Naruto does best to people. He was there to watch Naruto's journey coming to terms with Sasuke's rise to terrorism. Surely, now, he was reminding Sasuke of it to allude his retribution if Naruto were to become upset by Sasuke's doing again.

Which was cute.

“If Naruto has any qualms with me, we know how to resolve it by ourselves,” Sasuke assured him.

“Yes, I am aware that when you guys fight, you are on equal footing,” Sai agreed. “But I’ve told Naruto that I would always be on his side, should he need to tip the scales.”

“I would be grateful to you if you kept true to that promise for him.”

That had Sai blinking at him. It was nice to see the crack in his mask. It didn’t matter, anyway. Above all other desires, every ounce of him now was determined to keep Naruto safe. He didn’t think-

Across the room, Naruto was giving Gaara an exuberant hug. Sasuke swallowed thickly.

“Of course,” Sai was saying, his underlying character he usually masked now finally visible in its entirety. “Naruto is a great friend to me. I’m aware that he is much more than that to you. He can be annoying, but his strengths far outweigh his shortcomings.” Sasuke breathed hard out of his nose. He was getting the hang of Sai’s intentions. Then, the preview of his true tone of voice that Sasuke had gotten for the past few sentences was masked once again for him to ponder aloud, brightly, “Though I do have sympathy for you regarding the unfortunate size of his penis.”

Never mind. Sasuke had no idea who this guy was.

Naruto came bounding over to them. “Oi! Sai! I’m leav- oh. What were you guys talking about?”

“Your small penis!” Sai told him brightly.

It took another ten minutes for Sasuke to finally drag Naruto out of the estate after that affront. Sai knew every one of Naruto’s buttons to press, crude and teasing under his guise of polite vocabulary. Sasuke himself had gone very red, unable to speak. Eventually he had to grab Naruto by the ear again, because he didn’t seem to know that Sai was mocking him on purpose.

Naruto grumbled about Sai for a good portion of their walk back to his apartment. His drunkenness was apparent in both the way he spoke and the way he walked. Multiple times Sasuke had to tug on his jacket or arm before he ran into an object lining the street that he hadn’t noticed. Amusingly, midway through his grumbling, he switched tones about Sai, and instead went off about how good of a person he really was when he wasn’t being rude.

And then he started talking about all of his other friends, and how great he thought every single one of them was, speaking in length about each individual in turn. The praise went on and on, filling the quiet streets of the middle of the night with his rambling. Shikamaru, Choji, Ino, Lee, Tenten… Just as he finished about Kiba, he stopped in his tracks. “Oh! Hinata!” he exclaimed.

And then he turned on his heal and tried to run back to the estate. Sasuke only just grabbed the back of his jacket in time. “Oi! What are you doing?”

“I forgot to say goodbye to Hinata!” he whined. “I couldn’t find her, and then I forgot!”

Sasuke was right about to insist that she was fine when he remembered the way she had fainted earlier when Naruto had asked to kiss her. And Sasuke honestly had no idea about if she had been conscious in time to hear Sasuke’s words shortly after. She was probably not fine. So he didn’t say that. “You can apologize to her tomorrow.”

“Yeah. And thank her for throwing the party,” Naruto agreed, but he still hadn’t yet continued to walk. “She’s really nice. I mean, a bit weird, I guess, but super nice.” Ah. Great. He was back to praising all of his friends. Sasuke tugged on his arm, trying to get him to walk again, but he remained still. “And, and… and someone else. I’m forgetting someone else who was on her team…”

“Will you keep walking?” Sasuke pled. It was several hours after midnight. There were remnants of the day’s festival still lining the streets, but most of the people were gone. Even though the streets were empty, Sasuke was anxious to get back to the solitude of the apartment. The mattress was calling him.

Instead of moving, Naruto smiled at him. “I had a lot of fun with you today, Sasuke.”

Naruto’s close-mouthed smiles. They were always harder to deal with. Trying to not be affected by it, he huffed, “Come on, dumbass. Let’s go home.”

Something about what Sasuke had said surprised Naruto, because his smile fell slightly for him to blink a few times. “Yeah, okay,” he said, very slowly gaining his smile back. It was weird, and for the life of him Sasuke couldn’t figure out what had prompted it. Whatever. He was drunk. And then he shifted his wrist in Sasuke’s grip, lining their palms together, and holding it tightly so that Sasuke had no choice but to let it happen. It was Sasuke, then, who had trouble getting his feet to work under him.

The streets were empty, but it was still public. Sasuke wished Naruto would quicken their pace, because he seemed to be the one leading them, now. Which was a problem because he was still drunk and kept zigzagging them along the road.

Eventually they made it to the apartment. “Where’s your key?” Sasuke asked him at the front door. Naruto fished into his hip pack for it, then attempted twice to jam it into the lock. He missed miserably both times. “Give me that, dumbass,” Sasuke scolded him, letting go of Naruto’s hand to step in front of him and use his perfectly apt motor cortex.

Just as Sasuke twisted the key, Naruto’s chin rested over his left shoulder. It was comforting, so Sasuke let it continue. Just as Sasuke turned the handle, Naruto’s hands grasped both globes of his ass. It was jarring, so Sasuke did not let it continue.

Quicker than lightning, Sasuke spun around and had his sword to his throat. “Oi,” he warned.

Sniggering, Naruto stepped further into the blade, and Sasuke had a momentary second of weakness as he laxed his hand so as to not actually pierce his skin. It was an automatic thing, and Sasuke cursed himself, because Naruto had seemed to know it was a veiled threat. His hands were sneaking back around his body, his face leaning in close. “What?” he asked, daringly.

“D-Don’t- do that out here, dumbass,” Sasuke scolded him.

“Why? I thought you liked it?” Naruto smirked back. And then his hands found Sasuke’s ass again, and flashes of the pleasure Sasuke knew those fingers could bring him flooded his mind.

With a calculated surge of lightning, Naruto jolted away from him with a yelp. In his drunkenness, he almost went over the railing. Sheathing his katana, Sasuke rolled his eyes, “Come inside.”

Naruto pouted at him. “Can I grab your ass inside?”

Idiot. Sasuke sighed. “Come in and find out.” He took it too seriously, but it did get him inside the building. Even before the door was fully shut behind him, his hands were going straight for Sasuke again.

Too easy. Sasuke’s blade swiped through the air in the millimeters between them, his Chidori chirping dangerously through it. Naruto screamed again, nowhere to go but to slam his body against the door, shutting it the rest of the way. “S-Sasuke!” He finally seemed to get the message, so Sasuke re-sheathed his sword to continue to remove his shoes. “I thought you were flirting!” Naruto pouted at him.

“You’re drunk,” Sasuke told him. “I’m not going to touch you.”

“Except with your sword,” Naruto mumbled. With a chuckle, Sasuke did not refute him. Louder, Naruto pleaded, “Can’t we at least cuddle?”

Heat came up to Sasuke’s cheeks at the blatant question. Maybe that was- *one* term for it. But he didn’t like it. Wasn’t there a less embarrassing word for it he could have used instead? In the moment, Sasuke could not think of one. Instead of dignifying it with an answer, he nagged, “Go brush your teeth.”

“We can take a bath,” he tried to negotiate, a reprehensible smirk on his lips.

“It’s two in the morning,” Sasuke quickly denied him. “We’re going to bed. Go brush your teeth.”

Grumbling the entire way, Naruto went into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. His immaturity was astounding considering that he was known for saving the world. Sasuke knew that he would never change, which was unfortunately one of his best qualities.

Gaara’s words came to the front of his mind again. No, Naruto’s personality would never change. But would his viewpoints?

Sasuke's mind felt raw from thinking about it. Naruto had grown to see the corruption in the world, but he still considered Konoha one of his greatest loves. He was a jonin, now, which meant Kakashi would be able to utilize him more. The idea of Naruto being a mindless soldier might have been crippling if it wasn't for Kakashi. Distrustful as he could be for Kakashi on a personal level, Sasuke felt comfortable with him as Hokage. At least more than he would have been if it were any other shinobi. But even Kakashi had his faults, had been molded by the system of corruption. As unchangeable as Naruto was, he was still impressionable. He felt connected to people in incredibly strong ways, ways that could still modify his viewpoints.

And Sasuke would not be able to do anything about it. He could not puppeteer Naruto into doing what he wanted. Naruto was going to become Hokage one day, and once that happened, Sasuke would have no control over him. There were plenty of people who would oppose Naruto as Hokage on the sole basis that they would think that Sasuke would be granted a certain amount of power, but the truth was the complete opposite. With anyone else donning the cloak, Sasuke would be able to unseat them. He had his blade, and these eyes. He would be able to challenge anyone else's politics with blood.

Against Naruto, though, he had nothing.

His thoughts were interrupted by a loud crash coming from the bathroom, followed by Naruto opening the door. "I'm fine! I'm fine- knocked the- the thingy," he insisted, and Sasuke sighed his pent-up emotions out of his nose. Naruto squinted his eyes at him. "You're yelling at *me* to get ready. Have you just been standing there?"

Sasuke hadn't realized it, but yes, he had. He hadn't even taken off his cloak. Wordlessly, Sasuke shucked it off and brushed Naruto aside on his way into the bathroom.

When he came back out, Naruto was predictably shirtless, but unpredictably only in his underwear. He was sitting cross-legged on the bed, and upon seeing Sasuke reached both hands out and made grabbing motions at him. It would be pointless to try to fight it. He didn't want to enable him, but Sasuke didn't have the energy to deny it, especially when he knew they'd end up curled around each other anyway. And finding pajamas to change into would only prolong his departure from the mattress.

Rolling his eyes at Naruto's expression, Sasuke removed his own shirt and pants. He avoided Naruto's wordless plea to come directly into his arms, choosing to walk around to his side of the bed instead. Which was also pointless, because Naruto still latched onto him the moment he was close enough, making it a challenge to lay down.

He settled down on his back, needing to shift several times to find the most comfortable position for his arm to be crushed by Naruto's weight. The mattress was plush enough that it would not be as bad as on any other bed, but his arm was still bound to lose feeling. He considered the fact that if they switched sides, they wouldn't have that issue. But Sasuke slept on Naruto's left, and always had. And Naruto probably would not move from on top of his chest even if pried by a crowbar. Once he had his body conjoined to Sasuke's for the night, there was nothing to do but wait until morning.

The domesticity of it struck him. Sasuke knew how Naruto slept, knew what part of his sleep cycle he was in based on his snoring, now. He knew other little things, like how Naruto liked to set his chopsticks over his cup ramen for the three-minute wait in a specific way, or that he preferred the mint bubblegum flavor of toothpaste.

But he couldn't know for certain what kind of Hokage he would be.

"You okay?"

Naruto's gravelly voice shocked Sasuke. He hadn't expected Naruto would be able to hold a conversation anymore. More so, he felt unnerved by Naruto's ability to ask him such a thing right as his thoughts started to get darker. Deflecting, Sasuke frowned down at him. "Are *you* okay? You drank a lot."

When he giggled, Sasuke felt his whole-body shake. "Haha! Yeah, the room is kinda spinning right now. I don't think I'm gunna throw up, though."

Tutting, Sasuke thought of the mattress. "You better not."

"But 'm fine. 'M actually really good," his hands squeezed tight around Sasuke's middle, who flinched from the tickle. "I had a lot of fun today. I can't believe everyone threw me a party," he nuzzled his face into Sasuke's chest, so that his words sounded muffled. "'Ve never had one before. I'm- wait-" he pulled his face up, his chin resting over Sasuke's sternum. "No. I'm trying to ask if *you* are okay. Not me. 'Nd don't try to pretend you're not, 'cuz I can feel it, y'know?"

Crap.

"You don't really like crowds of people, right? You didn't- you didn't have to stay though, y'know?" He said that, but had spent the night practically bugging him with a tracking device and following his every move.

Sasuke averted his gaze, "I wanted to stay."

Naruto chewed his bottom lip. "Is it because I kissed all those other people?"

"I really couldn't care less who you kiss," Sasuke told him.

Quietly, Naruto admitted, "I don't really want to kiss other people, anymore." At Sasuke's raised eyebrow, he continued. "I mean, what's the point if they're not gunna feel as good as kissing you, y'know? It all felt like I was kissing walls. Took all of the fun out of it." Alright. That could change, Sasuke knew. Naruto could do what he wanted; he remembered the words, then the entire basket case that phrase now meant. Hesitant, Naruto asked him, "…Do you want to kiss other people?"

The nerves laden throughout his question brought Sasuke into the reality of other people, who typically cared for some reason if their partner kissed someone else. Was Naruto one of those people? Statistically, he probably was. His answer remained the same, regardless. "Why would I want to kiss someone else?"

A beat, and then Naruto smiled. “Kissing is pointless, huh?”

He couldn’t help the surge of embarrassment that flooded his cheeks. Gritting his teeth, he looked away again. “Kissing *other people* would be.”

It wasn’t a good thing to inflate Naruto’s ego any farther than it already naturally was, but there wasn’t any other way around it. Sasuke had no desire to kiss anyone else, and that was that. No one else knew him like Naruto did. He couldn’t drop his walls down for any other person. He trusted Naruto and Naruto alone to not exploit him when he was that weak.

With a boastful hum, Naruto grinned, “Good! I kinda like having you all to myself, anyway.” Of course he would think of it like that, as something to gloat over. “You’re still dodging the question,” Naruto pestered. Sasuke cursed to himself, but then Naruto added, “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. But I just don’t want you to think that we can’t talk about it, if we need to.”

Damn him. Alcohol really must hone his empathy. With a sigh, Sasuke finally had to give in. “I spoke to Gaara,” he started. Naruto cocked his head. “He told me what you’ve been doing for me. That he cleared my warrant in Suna.”

Judging by how wide Naruto’s eyes went, he hadn’t been expecting Sasuke to have found out in such a way. “Oh. Um. I-I’m sorry-”

“That’s not what I’m upset about,” Sasuke cut him off from thinking he would have been anything less than grateful. “We kept talking about it, and about why he couldn’t make those kinds of choices based wholly on his personal feelings.”

Down at Sasuke’s side, Naruto’s fist clenched harder. “…He… told you that, too, huh?”

Perhaps he should have waited for the morning, for a sober Naruto, for this conversation. But now that they were here, Sasuke needed to know. “Naruto,” he asked, making sure to keep eye contact. “What do you plan on doing once you become Hokage?”

“Bring peace to all villages.”

So he already had the answer prepared. Sasuke wondered if he had been that ready when Gaara had asked him the same question, as well. It was a childish answer, but Sasuke could see deeper than it. Maybe it was that simple. “And how do you plan on doing that?”

“By talking to people.”

By talking to people. Simple. Childish. And yet, Sasuke believed him. Why? “And what makes you think they will listen?”

“Because I’ll listen to them, first,” Naruto explained. “I’ve realized…” he trailed off for a second, his eyes dropping, but he returned back to his determination. “I’ve realized that there’s no difference between anyone, really. Everyone wants to be heard. And everyone deserves to be heard. I’m still learning all of the politics and all that. I know I’m not there, yet, but I also know what has been missing from the way things have been run in the past. It’s

hard for me to explain, but when you listen to people, and you get them to listen to you… things get better for everyone."

As bad as he was at putting it into words, Sasuke knew that Naruto's ideal was not naïveté. Sasuke was the inexperienced one in this situation. "What happens when what's better for one person is what's worse for the other?"

"Everything has to be done on a case-by-case basis," Naruto sighed. It didn't seem like this was the first time he was asked this question, either. "There is always a third option, somewhere. We'll find it." 'We', he said. Sasuke swallowed thickly. "I suppose you think I'm immature," Naruto smiled at him.

"No," Sasuke denied. "Well yes," he had to amend, "but not about this."

Naruto's expression softened to chuckle. "You know, every single person in this world has their own opinion about what's right and wrong. I don't know if mine is the correct one. I think the only way to know is to listen to everyone. One of us has to be right, right?" That was one way to look at it. "All of the battles I've ever had… they all ended with me learning that my opponent was just as human as I was. They all deserved to be heard. I learned my greatest lessons from some of them. Nagato. Obito…" he held Sasuke tighter. "You."

Naruto must have been able to feel Sasuke's heart thumping faster against his chin, because his smile grew again. He looked like he was savoring it, but he started to lift himself up, travelling upwards over Sasuke's body.

"I might not be smart, but I know what a Hokage *should* be," Naruto was almost level to Sasuke's face, now. "I've never once broken a promise, and I never plan on it. I'm going to become the Hokage that unites everyone from all countries. I want to make life easier for everyone, where they can live in a world without the cycle of hatred. It might take my whole life, but I won't be alone," he went past Sasuke's lips, the place Sasuke had anticipated he would stop, moving too high up for even eye contact, "I know you'll be there to help me make the right choices."

And then he kissed the middle of Sasuke's forehead.

That spot- Naruto did not know its significance. He could not have known that it would bring back flashes of his brother, of the fingertips that had kept him at a distance for their entire lives together. The enforced distance, the empty promises, the tap to his forehead. The last one, soaked with blood. Itachi had intended to leave him like that, never knowing the truth, to always keep him at the distance he thought would keep him safe. But then, in death, he finally closed the gap, held him close. The feel of Itachi's forehead against his own, of Itachi finally letting him in, flashed back in front of him with the brush of Naruto's lips. An apology from his brother. And another promise, finally one that Sasuke knew would stay true.

But this was a kiss. And it was anything but brotherly. Had it been the bond that had given Naruto the instinct to kiss him there? Naruto was close. He never kept Sasuke at his fingertips. He also never failed to deliver on his promises. Was Itachi the root of why he never trusted anyone? Naruto, above all others, could be trusted. It was his lips that caressed the bare stretch of skin of Sasuke's forehead, the one hidden beneath no headband.

Naruto’s ear was back down on Sasuke’s chest before he finished making sense of the gesture. Which was good, because there was a drop of wetness Sasuke didn’t want him to notice pooling in the corner of his eye that fell as he blinked.

How ridiculous Sasuke had been to doubt him. Hadn’t he already come to the realization one year ago, their life’s blood coagulating together? That Naruto’s dream was worthy of following? He had enough movement in his arm to be able to bring it up to the blond spikes. With Itachi still on his mind, his fingers carded along Naruto’s scalp as if it was instinct to mimic those precious moments when he *had* been close to his brother. He thought more on his own stupidity. Naruto *could* do what he wanted.

Naruto wanted to do what was right.

“You know, I think my head’s clear enough now for us to make out.”

“Go to sleep, dumbass.”

_o-O-o_

Chapter End Notes

i cannot believe i am actually posting the last chapter of this thing that has consumed my life for an entire year

i say that, but there fully is a whole epilogue to post tomorrow that is just as long as every other chapter lmao. so i'll save the sappy stuff for then, i guess

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_o-O-o_

It was July again.

The only reason Sasuke hadn't left the village was because Naruto's grip on his hand was impossible to dislodge. He'd be thankful for it later, but in the moment all he could do was glare. Naruto had been like this all month. The closer they had gotten to today's date, the clingier he had become. Which was not to be unexpected. Sasuke knew why he was doing it. At first Sasuke had scoffed at him, finding it ridiculous that Naruto thought he needed to be pinned down for it.

Now that the day was here, though, well. Turns out Naruto knew him better than he knew himself, like always.

It would have been one thing if the crowds hadn't shown up. Nowadays, though, people were more desperate for entertainment. Turns out with the absence of imminent threat and war, people get bored very easily. Opening day had been advertised and endorsed by both the Hokage and Naruto himself, so of course people came. And it felt like every single one of them now had eyesight on their linked hands.

They weren't a secret. People had figured it out long ago, spurred on by rumors that neither of them denied. All of their friends had known since Naruto's birthday last October. But this was the first time they had been so publicly displaying this level of affection with one another. Affection was something Sasuke liked to keep private. He had a reputation to uphold.

"What do you want to go see first?" Naruto asked him.

Our bed, he answered spitefully inside his own head. Naruto was the one dragging him around here. It wasn't Sasuke's choice; Naruto wasn't going to let him leave yet. He could still protest, at least. "I've already seen it all when it was being built."

"Ah, Sasuke," Kakashi called from the edge of the lawn. He was wearing the full Hokage robe, something he rarely donned in its entirety. Save for official events. Like today. Great. "I was afraid we were going to have to turn everyone away."

With a scoff, Sasuke rolled his eyes. "I said you didn't have to wait for me."

"Of course they did!" Naruto asserted.

"Sasuke! Naruto!" Sakura was running up to them as well. She addressed Naruto "Where have you been? You were supposed to have him here an hour ago!"

“*He* was the one who-” the rest of the sentence got cut off with a yelp. Sakura had tugged roughly on his other arm, powerwalking them all the rest of the way to the building. With Naruto’s hand still glued to Sasuke’s, the result was an unceremonious, clumsy train with Naruto flailing around in the middle and making it near impossible for Sasuke to stay upright himself.

She pulled them past the barricade rope, up the expensive stone stairway at the front of the building. Sasuke tried to avoid looking at the large crowd out front to save himself the embarrassment of knowing their reaction to this particular sight of him. Up near the large ornate front doors, Sasuke made out a number of familiar faces. The ones from Konoha were exasperating, but expected. But why on earth were *they* here?

“There he is,” Suigetsu smirked coolly at him. “Had to thaw out your feet this morning, did you?”

“What are you guys doing here,” Sasuke glared at the group.

“*Really*,” Karin had her arms crossed. “As if we would miss this.”

Jugo smiled at him. His face was older today, which Sasuke took as a sign that his therapy was still working. It had been quite a while since he last lost control. “We knew that this might be hard for you, so we decided to be here.”

Had any of the others said it, Sasuke would have scoffed at them. But it was Jugo. “Thanks, Jugo.”

“We’re here too, you know,” Suigetsu’s jealousy flared. He turned to Naruto to bitterly ask him, “Seriously, is he ever even that soft to *you*?”

Before Naruto could speak, Sasuke interjected, “Definitely not.”

“Yeah you *are*,” Naruto insisted, his temper teased to top notch just as Sasuke knew it would. “It was only last night that you-”

Thankfully, Sakura hit him over the head before he revealed too much. “Stop getting distracted! People are waiting!”

Rubbing his injury, Naruto whined, “Why am I the only one who gets hit?! I wasn’t the one who started this!”

And Sasuke would have laughed, but he still had PTSD from last week when, for the first time in their lives, he had been on the receiving end of one of her tirades. She hadn’t hit him the way she always did when she scolded Naruto, but Sasuke could piece together that it wouldn’t be much longer before she finally felt comfortable enough in their friendship to do such a thing to him. It had always been funny to watch Naruto get the brunt of her rage, but now that Sasuke knew he could soon be forced to collect the same punishment…

He was reconsidering if having to deal with her crush had actually been that bad.

Just as they continued to walk, Karin tapped his shoulder, and he stopped to listen to her whisper in his ear. Naruto had clotheslined himself instead of just letting go of their hands. Seeing her hand go up to Sasuke's ear, Naruto leaned in to listen as well. "I don't want to make you any more anxious than you already are," Karin warned him, "but he followed us here, today. Kabuto, too. They're both hiding in a tree, one hundred and fifty meters, seven o'clock. I don't think they're here to do anything but watch."

Sasuke's eyes activated for him to discreetly look backwards. He could see their chakra concealed up behind the mentioned tree. Gritting his teeth, Sasuke wondered why Orochimaru would be interested in this at all. It's not like they were hiding any Sharingan in test tubes inside the building for him to steal.

To his surprise, both Orochimaru and Kabuto revealed themselves, giving him disgustingly cheery waves. Sasuke once again lamented on his ever-thriving desire to kill them both.

The sooner the day was over, the better. Sasuke tugged Naruto onward, who was equally glaring at the pair in the tree. Between those two and what was in front of him, Sasuke would rather go forward. Naruto grumbled, "What do they want this time?"

"I don't want to think about it," Sasuke groaned. Over the past year, Orochimaru had turned up at the most random times, to the point where Sasuke had stopped being able to predict it. He supposed he was still trying to research his and Naruto's bond, but Sasuke couldn't see how he'd be getting any information. Their best course of action for that should have been to try to get Naruto on his own where he could easily be tricked into talking, but when Sasuke was away, Naruto stayed in the village. It was more annoying than anything now, almost a guarantee that no matter which direction Sasuke decided to head out of the village, whether Naruto was with him or not, he'd run into at least one of them at some point. He had seen them so often nowadays that he had little energy left to do anything about it but roll his eyes and ignore them.

So instead, Sasuke faced his next obstacle with a scowl. Naruto's hand was weighty in his, and Sasuke had a moment where he was grateful that it was still there. Kakashi clapped his shoulder once before turning to address the crowd. He started on a speech that Sasuke assumed was touching or whatever. He had trouble paying attention to it. Not wanting to be seen, Sasuke fell into the background, his back to the crowd, glowering at the large front doors.

Naruto bumped his shoulder. The action snapped him out of his dark thoughts. Kakashi was still talking, his voice nothing more than the thrumming of a bass line to Sasuke. Naruto was smiling at him, close mouthed, eyes soft. His breath finally caught up to him for the first time since that morning. He held the hand in his tighter.

An eruption of applause came from the crowd, which meant that Kakashi was finished talking. He suddenly felt guilty for having not listened to it. There wasn't much time for him to wallow in his guilt, though, because the doors were being opened. Sakura at one door, Kakashi at the other, they opened the doors outward, and Sasuke was hit with a rush of air.

He hadn't realized he had been holding Naruto's hand so desperately until the hand slipped from his grasp. Panicking for a moment without it, Sasuke sent him a curious look. All

Naruto did in response was reposition the hand, ghosting it over the middle of Sasuke's back, just below his shoulder blades. The fingertips were barely there, and so was his whisper, "Go ahead."

So he did.

The Uchiha Museum of History looked much different from the last time Sasuke had visited, even though it hadn't been that long ago. Back then the walls had been mainly bare, glass cases holding nothing but air, plaques empty. Now, the large entrance was filled with the artifacts and items of his people. The most glaring feature of the entrance, literally, was the pair of Sharingan painted so lifelike on a wide pillar that overlooked patrons entering the building. Three tomoe. They were meant as a deterrent, Sasuke was told. The eyes could see the truth and judged whomever entered, warning guests of the power the that building held.

The eyes looked exactly like his mother's, Sasuke had muttered to only Naruto on the night he had first seen them. '*They probably do*,' Naruto had replied, '*because they were modeled after yours*.'

The crushing emotions came, just as Sasuke had been afraid that they would. Naruto was still outside, only a few meters away because that was as far as Sasuke had made it into the building. He wished he still had his hand to hold, but this was the way it was supposed to be. Sasuke was the first guest of the museum. In a few minutes' time, they would let the rest of the village enter. This time was for Sasuke to get a head start.

The entrance hall was dedicated mainly to the overview of the clan, what made an Uchiha and Uchiha. Sasuke could see the weapons and talismans of his past. He remembered talking about each and every one in detail, what they all meant to his clan and what they were used for. There had been some items that even Sasuke knew very little about, and they had to consult the texts to gather information on them. He couldn't help chastising himself for not asking his parents more about these things as a child, as if an eight-year-old would possibly have had the foresight to predict such things would be so important.

The museum was set up as a linear walk throughout history from there. The next room was an exhibit on Indra, the man whose soul had been rebirthed into Sasuke's. The Sage of Six Paths had a piece of the room, as did Indra's brother, Ashura. Paintings of the brothers were muraled on opposing walls, Ashura to the left, Indra to the right. The eyes of the murals locked into one another. Indra and Ashura, fingers up, indicating battle with the Seal of Confrontation.

Sasuke did not need to read their stories. He did not need to read many of the plaques, as he had already spent enough time doing so when he greenlit them all during construction. They had met with several historians who had offered more details to add, but they hardly needed them. Who was a better historian than the Sage of Six Paths himself?

In the next room, the one dedicated to the early formation of the Uchiha clan, Sasuke noticed Naruto was waiting a good distance behind him at the entrance of the room. Judging by the noise, Sasuke assumed they had finally let the public into the building. Naruto and the others were probably holding them off from coming too far in and disturbing Sasuke.

He spent some time in that room before moving onto the next, which was dedicated solely to the Sharingan. The room was colored with blood red accents, the same color as the eyes. This room had been difficult to figure out. For so long, the Uchiha had kept the secrets of their eyes under tight lip. It would be a danger to Sasuke to have those secrets be too exposed. In the end, though, Sasuke was not worried. It had been impossible to keep the details of the Sharingan as hidden as the Uchiha had wanted it to be to outsiders back in the height of their clan; much was already public knowledge. And Sasuke assured them that having knowledge of the Sharingan was hardly a handicap for his opponents at his level of mastery.

Diagrams lined the wall, depicting the different forms of the Sharingan: each tomoe level, Mangekyou, even the Eternal Mangekyou. Between each were details as to how the eye evolved into the next level. The word ‘hatred’ had been forbidden from being in this room. Kakashi also knew what it was like to develop the Sharingan, about how hate had nothing to do with it.

Continuing through the exhibit, the following room centered around the creation of Konoha. Here, there was another mural that mimicked the one of Indra and Ashura. Madara on the right, Hashirama on the left, eyes locking across the room. Another supposed iteration of his and Naruto’s souls. They, like the ones before them, were also signaling each other with the Seal of Confrontation, making it a clear reinterpretation of the statues he and Naruto had destroyed nearly two years ago, now.

A quick glance backwards at Naruto, leaning against the doorway to the previous room. At least two other lifetimes they had spent intertwined in each other’s lives. Sasuke found the mural of Hashirama again, studying it. He had spoken to Hashirama’s reanimated corpse before joining the war. It had been his words, not any of other the other Hokage summoned, that motivated him to allying with the Shinobi Force. In the light of now knowing the way they were linked, Sasuke could see the similarities between the first Hokage and Naruto. The differences of environment and situation curated each into their own person, but at the heart of it all, they both shared the same light. He gave a careful eye to the mural of Madara, and assumed the same of himself with that one.

He continued on, not needing to delve into the history lesson he already knew far too much about. The next room was a precious one. It showed of the importance the Uchiha had been to the development of the village. It had details of the creation of the police force, ones that did not hide the Second Hokage’s true nature for it. His distrust, which amplified the distrust of others, had festered the conditions that led to their oppression. This was the room that Sasuke wanted people to really understand. This held the roots of their mistreatment, and was his best chance at getting people to realize where the events of the next room began.

It was in that next room that Sasuke started to breathe heavily. It was a somber exhibit; dark colors around the room painted the tragedy in the history it taught. He couldn’t walk too far in; his brother was on a pillar in front. Sasuke remembered how it had taken him over a month to read through the manuscript for all of the plaques in this room.

He had been standing still long enough that when Naruto touched his hand, he jumped. Wordlessly, Sasuke interlocked their fingers. He needed to walk past this room, before he started-

But there were already tears dripping from his chin. They must have been there for a while; they must have been the reason that Naruto couldn't stand back any longer. Maybe it would have been better to have had Naruto next to him the whole time. He desperately wished to block his emotions; there were only a few rooms left, and then it would link back to the entrance exhibit. Sasuke did not have much time to clear his mind before mingling through the crowd again.

The memory of Sakura describing how dangerous it was for him to close off these emotions came to him. It was, medically speaking, bad for his health, she had said. But it was all he had ever known, all he could do to rid himself of the torture. Naruto had said it long ago, now. The Uchiha *felt* more than any other group of people. Love, grief, fear. It had led others to insanity. And into being manipulated. If Itachi…

This coping mechanism of closing himself off was all Sasuke could do to protect himself. He was getting better at it, at not letting it shut him down. Sometimes he could find ways to chip at his wall to let a trickle through, but it was a dangerous game of not cracking it too hard for the pressure of emotion to shatter it completely. His wall was his only crutch on some days, even if he was aware that the weight of it could be his own demise.

He pulled Naruto further. He did not want to see the rest of this room. There was a section on him in it that he especially wanted to avoid. If he had his way, he wouldn't have been mentioned at all in this building, but it was something that the other three members of his team refused to cave on. The worst of it was a bit down the line, which he was sure he would avoid when he got there as well.

The next room was about Obito. Sasuke had not wanted to sugarcoat his story; he had not done so to Madara, either. This museum was about the truth. He had no desire to rewrite their history. The past rooms would have plenty of explanations as to why an Uchiha would do such things that, hopefully, people would understand. Sasuke's name was on these walls a good number of times, so he wanted to avoid this room as well.

If it weren't for Naruto, he would have walked straight through the last room.

The tug on Sasuke's hand was what kept him back. Naruto was looking around, his eyes fixated to the murals on the wall. Like Ashura and Indra, Hashirama and Madara, he and Naruto had been painted on opposing walls, Sasuke on the right, Naruto on the left, signaling battle to each other. He was staring up where Sasuke knew his face was painted, though Sasuke vehemently did not follow his gaze.

This room, according to the others, was necessary. It had come into fruition mainly by the work of them, as Sasuke could barely sit still when they discussed it. They told him that it was important to put the details of his involvement with the war, and how the tragedy Konoha bestowed on him led him to the choices he made. Thankfully this room was smaller than the others, as there weren't as many artifacts in this room like in the rooms past because all of Sasuke's weapons were currently in his possession. There was one item, though, one precious item that finally found a home here. He spared a glance around the room, wondering where it was, but he couldn't see it yet.

Sasuke's agreement on the room lay with the decision to include Naruto. He needed to be included, as he was such a vital part of Sasuke's story. Feeling a little uncomfortable, Sasuke looked up at Naruto's mural. It was very life-like. He remembered the day they were asked to pose for it, how Naruto had boasted about his own good looks for hours. Everyone else thought he was doing it out of narcissism, but in actuality, he was doing it for Sasuke's sake. And it worked. He had a hard time feeling uncomfortable about his own image being taken when Naruto was being so ridiculous and annoying. He could focus on rolling his eyes at Naruto and calling him a dumbass. It was their rapport for Naruto to claim all of the attention on himself so that Sasuke had the freedom of not being watched.

Eventually Naruto began walking, Sasuke keeping his head down and letting himself be led. As they came closer toward the exit, Sasuke became curious enough about how dark it was on this end that he had to look up. He frowned, "There's a light out."

That was strange, because the building was brand new. Maybe it was faulty wiring? But Naruto shook his head. "No, it's supposed to be like this." Puzzled, Sasuke furrowed his brows. Why would they want this section to be dark? Sasuke hadn't approved anything like that.

Naruto answered him instead by letting go of Sasuke's hand to hold it up between them. He began feeding the space his energy, a specific act that Sasuke knew as second nature by now. On instinct, Sasuke paralleled him. The dark gas birthed out their brilliant light, weighty and powerful. They had yet to find an object that could deter it, nor one that could pierce it. Naruto began to guide it away from them, and Sasuke was too intrigued about where it was going to want to deter its movement.

Gingerly, Naruto eased their jutsu down into a display case, sitting it atop a pedestal that held it in three decorative prongs. The reason for the darkness became apparent. The orb lit up the entire back section of the room.

Glinting behind it in the same case, Sasuke found the personal item that he entrusted to the museum. Battered, tarnished, scratched. His headband reflected the light of their jutsu. The line through the symbol, so long ago now that it had been etched by Naruto's hand in the midst of battle, contrasted prominently. Next to it was the only plaque Sasuke was interested in reading:

"The strongest substance in the world are the bonds we have with each other."

--

Depicted here are two representations of the impact that we as people have on one another. Above is the headband once belonged to Sasuke Uchiha, damaged in battle with Naruto Uzumaki. Its crossed insignia, like Uchiha's decision to leave the village, was the result of their childhood in Konohagakure under leadership that failed them both. Only after the two orphans found ways to understand one another did they form the alliance we know of today. Lighting the end of this exhibit is the jutsu they created, Kizuna Hikari, a manifestation of their bond in the physical form. This jutsu is currently hypothesized to be the most indestructible object in the world.

It took several rereads for Sasuke to make sense of it all. His headband, so symbolic of his departure of the village, shining brightly in the luminance of their bond. Now that they had let go of the orb, it would be impossible for anyone to move it. They had learned that other people could not move it, even when both he and Naruto dropped control and gravity took over. He remembered months ago, when Naruto had asked to perform an experiment by seeing if their jutsu would fade over time. It never did. They had another ball of light hanging out in Naruto's kitchen cabinet. It was originally on the kitchen table until Sakura tried to move it one day to set the table for their dinner, but couldn't. Even though it could roll around freely on its own, and even with her strength, she could not budge it. They moved it to the cabinet to keep it out of the way.

He thought of how the display must have come to be. "You did this," he commented.

"We couldn't think of anything better to end the exhibit with," Naruto shrugged, as though offhand. But Sasuke saw through it. If it had been that nonchalant, they would have placed the Kizuna Hikari in its spot last week.

Naruto had known Sasuke would be upset, today. He knew how much this museum meant to him, how it would make him feel to see the finished project. Sasuke had never been able to conceal his emotions to Naruto, even when he cowered behind his own mental wall to block himself from feeling them.

Even now, the overwhelming rush stunting his thought process, Naruto knew exactly what he needed. With gentle hands, Naruto cupped Sasuke's face, tilting it down. He placed a kiss square in the middle of his forehead, the spot once hidden behind the scratched insignia of the headband on the wall. The spot that had always symbolized promises to him. Brought in close with a kiss, not held at the distance of fingertips. He had never told Naruto about the significance of that spot, but he didn't have to. Naruto knew, instinctually, the kind of medicine it brought him. Sasuke's eyelids fluttered shut, savoring the feeling.

"We can go now, if you want," Naruto offered him. He did want, so he nodded and claimed the hand that he wasn't done holding yet. Sasuke spared one last glance upward as they left the room, where a casting of disembodied hands performed the Seal of Reconciliation. His and Naruto's hands, but also Hashirama and Madara, and Indra and Ashura. Patrons of the museum would see it as an end to war and corruption, but Sasuke saw it as something more personal.

The circular floorplan of the museum brought the end of the exhibit right back around to the beginning, in the front entrance hall. It was jarring to see the room now bursting with the life of Konoha citizens. Children were bounding from display case to display case, gawking at the relics of the Uchiha culture. Parents were jabbering away with one another, teenagers cracking jokes between themselves. It was a bizarre sight for Sasuke to take hold of. Each person would have their own takeaway from this place, both young and old. Sasuke had no control over their final thoughts.

There had been protesters, Sasuke knew. The people who still held prejudice against his people despite them being long gone had not taken to the news of this museum very well. Those people had always existed within Konoha's history- even before then. So logically, it made no sense for Sasuke to feel any amount of anxiety towards them today. Logically. He

reminded himself that he didn't care about anyone else's opinion, so long as they formulated said opinion with the knowledge of the whole truth. They could hate him and his people all they wanted, provided they had their facts correct first. But it was still daunting to have this museum now open for public scrutiny.

"Naruto, Sasuke."

"Gaara!" Naruto greeted happily, his smile wide. Sasuke raised his eyebrows. "You came all the way from Suna!"

Kankuro and Temari were standing behind the Kazekage, as they always were. Gaara offered the barest of smiles, something akin to gleaming in his case. "Yes. We were all very interested in seeing this place. You've spoken so highly of it all year." Then, he addressed Sasuke, "Congratulations, Sasuke."

These past several months had been… strange, with Gaara. They had developed a peculiar kind of relationship. It all began over the winter, one day, when Gaara had come to visit Naruto at his apartment on a day when Sasuke was hanging around. Naruto had been incredibly excited, but had suddenly remembered that he had a birthday gift to give him that for some reason he was keeping in the Hokage office. Naruto had left them in such a hurry to go get it that neither Gaara nor Sasuke had the chance to suggest going with him, leaving them both alone in the apartment together for a good half hour.

Instead of silence, they talked about Naruto. 'Talk' was hardly the word most other people would use to describe that half hour, as neither of them spoke more than five words at a time. But this shorthand form of conversation worked rather well as a method of communication for them. Combined with the fact that they both had incredibly similar understandings of the world, and an equal amalgamation of both exasperation and fondness of Naruto, Sasuke found himself realizing that Gaara was actually an engaging person.

That wasn't to say they weren't still awkward toward each other, though. It was like they still both didn't like each other, but couldn't quite remember the reason for the distaste anymore. During any kind of discussion with others around, they kept finding themselves agreeing with the other more and more. Naruto had commented in awe to him once that he always thought both Sasuke and Gaara were incredibly similar, and ever since then, Sasuke couldn't help but see it, too. Which was weird, because he still didn't really like him. But then Sasuke thought how he didn't much like himself, either, which only confirmed Naruto's assessment further.

"Thanks," Sasuke said, unsure if he meant it or not. Gaara's congratulations had sounded sincere, so maybe he did.

Gaara nodded at him, and Sasuke was able to discern that yeah, he had meant it. "We're going to go and see the rest of the exhibit," he stated.

"Yeah! Let us know what you think, okay? We can get some lunch tomorrow to talk about it!" Naruto asserted.

Knowing exactly where his mind had gone, Sasuke quickly curbed him, "We already had ramen this week." Sasuke had implemented a rule that they were only allowed to have ramen

once a week. He tried to make it once a month, but some things were impossible.

“But it’s a special occasion!” Rolling his eyes, Sasuke gave a huff. Naruto won on the grounds of ‘special occasions’ so often that Sasuke was going to have to mandate the laws of what that term meant soon.

The Suna trio left to explore the rest of the building, and Sasuke attempted to drag Naruto further out of the room. They were stopped every three meters by a different acquaintance congratulating them both on the opening. He let Naruto handle them, since many of them were too scared to talk to him anyway. They finally made it to the entrance, but were thwarted from leaving once again by none other than Kakashi, who seemed to have been observing the crowds along with Shikamaru.

Raising a hand in greeting, Kakashi asked him, “How was the exhibit?”

Sasuke couldn’t pretend like Kakashi had aimed that question at Naruto. “…It’s good,” he admitted.

For a moment, Sasuke was afraid that his old teacher was going to tease him for his jaded answer. But Sasuke had said it was ‘good’, and not ‘fine’ or any other less appreciative answer, which was an improvement for how he would have normally answered such a question. Instead, Kakashi gave him a wry smile. “And the last room? How did you find that one?”

Right. The end of the exhibit had not been a solo decision by Naruto. Clenching his teeth, Sasuke turned his face, feeling himself instinctually wishing he could hide it in Naruto’s shoulder like he was some petulant child. “It’s good,” he repeated, despite how he wished he could come up with a better adjective.

“Sorry we didn’t greenlight it by you.” Kakashi’s eyes had gone softer looking at him, which made Sasuke feel even more like a child. He could tell that Kakashi had read further into his responses than he was comfortable with. And the way Naruto was beaming certainly didn’t help either. Nor did the fact that they were still holding hands. But Sasuke wasn’t about to let go.

“It’s good,” he tried to deflect, realizing too late that he had repeated that line *again*.

“Good, good,” Kakashi finally teased him, and Sasuke did his best to subdue how red his face was getting. He left the teasing at that, though, thankfully not testing Sasuke’s current limits. Sasuke swallowed thickly. They did not officially *have* to get Sasuke’s final okay on every minor detail, but they did for the majority of it out of respect. Towards the end, he had enough trust in all of them to feel like he could step away from it for a bit. Still, he could see why Kakashi might think it would be a risk to put such a personal display in at the end of the exhibit without making sure Sasuke would be okay with it. “Do you mind if I, uh. Ask you something in private, then?”

In private? Kakashi was rubbing the back of his head in that nervous way. Instinctually, Sasuke held Naruto’s hand tighter. He didn’t want to let go of it yet, but he couldn’t deny that he was curious. “Now?” he questioned, eyeing the room.

“Yes, if you don’t mind,” Kakashi jutted his thumb right outside the entrance. Giving a shrug, Sasuke begrudgingly let go of the hand and started walking.

“About what?” Naruto frowned, and he was about to start walking alongside Sasuke and Kakashi when Shikamaru held his arm out to stop him.

“He means just him and Sasuke, you dunce,” Shikamaru detailed for him.

The information dawned on him, apparently having considered the concept too farfetched, judging by his facial expressions. “Sasuke’s just gunna tell me, anyway.” Probably, Sasuke agreed in his mind, but then again it all depended on what it was about.

Waving his hand dismissively, Kakashi soothed him, “You’ll find out for yourself soon, hopefully,” before leading Sasuke out of the building.

They made their way down the stone steps. Kakashi brought him toward the temple, which had been reconstructed to perfection by Sasuke’s memory. There were a few people mingling around it, but not a lot. Instead of taking him inside, Kakashi brought him under the tree which had somehow survived Pain’s attack. Seeing it always gave him some form of relief; at least there was one thing from his childhood home that remained preserved. Leaning against its trunk steadied him, giving him a sturdy foundation.

He waited for Kakashi to start. “I have a request,” he began. The terminology resonated in him. Kakashi had stopped sending him on ‘missions’; instead, he chose to label them ‘requests’. Missions were for Konoha shinobi. Requests were personal favors. They had never had a conversation about it, but Sasuke took it as a sign that Kakashi now respected Sasuke’s decision to remain rogue. At Sasuke’s raised eyebrow, he explained, “Naruto has taken to complaining about his lessons again.”

So this *was* about Naruto, which was why he wanted to talk to Sasuke alone. Sasuke had suspected as much. Yes, Naruto had started to get frustrated with those lessons he was still taking with Iruka. It seemed he thought they would end after he made jonin, and for good reason, because he had started taking them under the guise that it was to prepare him to become a chunin. That was, of course, not the case, and everyone except Naruto had figured out what they really were for. Which was for the best, because if Naruto had learned he was getting all of this special training to gear him up for being Hokage, well. He’d probably annoy the entire village into not wanting him to lead them anymore.

Sasuke gave a grunt of affirmation for Kakashi to continue. “He has learned a lot, but even I have to admit that he doesn’t excel in academia. He learns the material fine, but he is abysmal at test taking and homework to prove it. So I’ve decided to pivot his learning method. He learns best with practical lessons. Do you remember that trip he took to Suna last year?” Like Sasuke could forget it. He nodded. “I am planning to set him up to assist other villages in similar fashion. Kumo and Kiri already agreed to host him, and I’m working on Iwa.”

Frowning, Sasuke considered this plan. He thought it was a great idea; Naruto did learn best in hands-on situations. And even if the other countries weren’t as loyal to the peace treaty as they said, all of the Kage knew Naruto personally enough to not suspect foul play from him. Everyone wanted peace, and Naruto gaining knowledge of the workings of all other countries

would only assist in that, they must now know. But still, there was something concerning. “What does this have to do with me?” he asked, because surely Kakashi was not simply requesting his opinion on the idea.

“I would like you to go with him,” he finally asked.

Huh. Furrowing his brows, Sasuke’s brain whirled into overdrive. Opposite Naruto, if there was one singular person the Kage would not trust with their precious inner workings, it would be Sasuke. He was well known for having wanted to assassinate them all (even if the specific incident they thought Sasuke had attempted such campaigns wasn’t the correct one). Sure, they all had cleared his warrant, but some only just a few months ago. Even being shackled to Naruto wouldn’t make them comfortable with him learning their policies and political systems. “Why?” he inquired, unable to work through it.

Kakashi’s hand rested on his shoulder. The physical contact had Sasuke freezing underneath it. It felt too genuine for it to be a manipulation tactic. Kakashi had very rarely used those nowadays. He couldn’t figure out the reason for it. “I want you to think about it,” Kakashi sighed. “When Naruto becomes Hokage,” not ‘if’, “who is he going to want on his staff?” Who was Naruto going to want on his staff? He’d probably inherit Shikamaru, that was certain, and then he would…

Oh.

The hand on his shoulder was starting to burn, but Sasuke didn’t want it to leave. “Even if you refuse an official title,” Kakashi’s voice was quiet, safe, “he’s still going to come to you for advice. And I don’t think you will deny him it. He’s never going to stop seeing you two as a team. It won’t matter if you deny any official position he’ll try to give you; people will see you as a sort of Shadow Hokage to him. I want to prepare you for it as much as I possibly can. This position was thrusted onto me. I had no training when I was given this seat, and neither did Tsunade, for that matter. You know more than anyone how much I’ve fucked up from being inexperienced. I don’t want that to happen to him, and by that extension, to you.”

Had he really thought that far ahead? If people were going to see it like that in the future, were they seeing it like that now? If that were the case, Naruto would never be named Hokage. His eyes fell across the field, where people were congregating in the fields outside of the museum. His museum. Sighing, Sasuke warned, “You’re going to have a lot of trouble convincing the other Kage to let me into their council buildings.”

“I told you Kumo and Kiri have already agreed,” Sasuke’s eyes snapped back at him, wide. “And Iwa is just taking a little bit of convincing. Gaara is planning on vouching to the Tsuchikage on your behalf.” Gaara was? It was all a bit much for Sasuke to wrap his head around. Kakashi squeezed his shoulder tighter. “Let me know your answer as soon as you’re ready.”

He dropped the hand and was about to walk away. He knew how Sasuke usually operated, that he would typically need time. Except, right now, Sasuke found that he didn’t. “I’ll go.”

Kakashi stopped, curiously. “You will?”

Crap. Sasuke found himself tapping his foot. “It’ll make Naruto happy,” he said as an excuse.

Kakashi saw through it, but played along. “It sure will,” he said, attempting to hide his chuckle. Sasuke watched him look back at the museum, at the children playing in the field, the adults gossiping happily. He felt a tight knot in his chest at the sight. “I apologize in advance for what I am about to do right now,” Kakashi said, which raised a lot of suspicious flags that Sasuke didn’t have the time to decipher before-

Arms wrapped around Sasuke’s body, pulling him in. Kakashi had hugged him. The mere *idea* of such a thing happening was enough to short-circuit his brain. It was… fatherly, and comforting, and not at all like anything Sasuke would have guessed it would be coming from Kakashi. Neither he nor Kakashi were physical people. They only enjoyed physical contact with people they…

His eyes were watering, to Sasuke’s own horror. He hadn’t been hugged like this, as though by a parent, since he was eight years old. For it to happen here and now, his back against the trunk of the only other living remnant of the Uchiha clan... After a moment of shock, Sasuke found himself hugging back, the intrigue of this feeling too much to not give into.

They stood like that, hugging, for far too long. Neither of them were good at this. Sasuke had no idea when it was appropriate to let go, and neither, it seemed, did Kakashi. It felt overwhelmingly and confusingly nice. But the moment stretched. Eventually, Sasuke had to say, “This is weird.”

Kakashi laughed uneasily. “It certainly is strange.” And then he pulled back, and Sasuke felt too conflicted about if he wanted to let go or not, but he had to, he definitely had to. Kakashi was blushing, and Sasuke felt heat on his own cheeks, too. “Okay, well. That’s done.” Kakashi awkwardly added. “I’ll- uh. Go check on how things are going at the museum.”

Thankfully, he left, leaving Sasuke in peace to try to figure out what the fuck just happened.

He did not have any time to do so. “How touching!” Sasuke’s blade was at Orochimaru’s throat by the second word. It would have gone through it, decapitating him, if not for the snake he had summoned catching it between its fangs. He contemplated sending his Chidori through it to finish the job. “I do wonder sometimes if you will ever stop trying to murder me as a greeting.”

Sasuke’s eye caught Kabuto’s movement, who was shrugging as he casually approached them. “I keep trying to tell you that it’s not civil to materialize unannounced on people.”

Scoffing, Sasuke considered the children laughing not fifty meters away from them. He didn’t want to spoil their livelihood by having them witness homicide. He bitterly removed his blade, but did not sheathe it. “What do you want.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Orochimaru tempted him, his dark voice always so unnerving. “I came to congratulate you.”

Gross. And also quite suspicious. “Who let you into the village?”

“I submitted a formal request, and it was granted.” Sasuke clenched his jaw tightly, glaring at the path Kakashi had just left on. He would need to have another conversation with him. Orochimaru was getting far too comfortable. Kabuto, too. Did no one else remember the horrors they had committed? “Who would have thought that Konoha would one day have the galls to honor the Uchiha in such a way? It’s beautiful, yes, but also quite demented when you think about it.”

Kabuto chimed in, “Now, I’m sure under any other Hokage, yes, but Kakashi knows how to do its due diligence.”

Orochimaru hummed. “Hmm. Yes, especially since he made sure every decision was first approved by our Sasuke-kun, here.”

Sasuke was not going to sit around while these two prattled on about this useless stuff. “I’ll ask you one more time. What. Are you doing here.”

With a sigh, Orochimaru singsonged, “Always so suspicious.” When he smiled, Sasuke had the desire to blast through it with his Chidori. “Really, all we wanted was to be here to support you.” Sasuke squinted as he continued, eyeing the hand on his chest and closed eyelids, “I have never felt any type of parental emotion like pride in others before, but when it comes to you, Sasuke-kun, it appears I have a weakness.”

...Parental?

Horrorstricken, Sasuke took a step backwards. It had to be- obviously, Orochimaru was just teasing him, trying to get him to react. Even knowing this, Sasuke had no idea how to respond. “You’ve never felt any such feelings toward me?” Kabuto asked nonchalantly, making it worse.

“Not until recently,” Orochimaru admitted. “Perhaps I should make an amendment. You, Kabuto, are like my child whom I’ve always been too hard on, and Sasuke-kun is like my grandchild whom with I finally learned softness.” His words wedeled their way under his skin like insects. And then Orochimaru added, oily voice sickly sweet, “I think I’ll be most proud to see the final room in the exhibit, wouldn’t you think so, Kabuto?”

His anger jolted him out of his disgust. “How do you know what the final room is?”

This wasn’t the first time Sasuke had grown suspicious of Orochimaru still having spies inside of Konoha. But Orochimaru just answered simply, shrugging, “Just a guess. Though judging from your response, I’m not far off on my hypothesis, am I?” Sasuke was going to kill him. The sooner, the better. He didn’t have any other plans for the day.

“Sasuke!” Naruto was running over at top speed, but he stopped a few meters off from them, flabbergasted by the sight. He must have felt Orochimaru and Kabuto’s presence near Sasuke’s, and rushed in on instinct. But seeing them so casually having a conversation made him second guess the urgency. “What… is going on?”

Kabuto waved, and Orochimaru greeted kindly, “Naruto-kun! How nice to see you! We were just congratulating Sasuke-kun on the opening of the museum! I suppose we should also

extend the same to you, no?"

"R… Right…" Naruto's uneasy eyes flickered to Sasuke's, trying to find answers.

"We're leaving," Sasuke proclaimed, his tetchy mood taking the reins. He walked off, jerking Naruto by the bicep on the way. Behind them, Orochimaru and Kabuto were calling out chillingly kind farewells, and Sasuke did all he could to tune them out.

When they finally made it outside of the newly reconstructed clan gates, Naruto asked him, heartily, "What the fuck was that?"

Eyebrow twitching, Sasuke scoffed, "I'm trying to erase it from my memory."

They set off down the familiar road back to Naruto's apartment. Thankfully, Naruto decided he also did not want to know what Orochimaru and Kabuto were up to, and instead asked, "What did Kakashi want to talk to you about?"

Of course he was dying to know that. Kakashi hadn't been slick enough to hide that he specifically did not want Naruto to know yet, which in turn made it an irresistible bit of knowledge that Naruto was bound to become obsessed with knowing. Pursing his lips, Sasuke attested that Kakashi had not told him to keep it a secret. Naruto would find out about it soon enough. But he didn't fancy having to go into details, now. "He's got a mission for us that he wanted to know if I'd accept."

"For… us?"

Sasuke grunted. "He doesn't have all of the details for it yet. Just wanted to know if I'd be up to going with you."

He had tried to sound unaffected, like the ordeal bored him more than anything, but it didn't stop Naruto's excitement. A few steps forward and Sasuke realized Naruto had stopped walking, and he turned a questioning eye toward him. "We get to go on a mission together?!" Naruto exclaimed, fists balled.

Chuckling in amusement at this reaction, Sasuke affirmed, "Yeah." And then Naruto was whooping loudly in the middle of the street, jumping up and down. "Don't you even want to know what it is?"

Naruto's body slammed into him, and Sasuke had little time to anticipate it. "No- I mean, well, yeah, but that's not what's important! We haven't been on an official mission together since we were kids! I'm excited!"

Sasuke shook his head, squirming out from under Naruto's weight. "You're unbelievable."

He didn't seem put off by Sasuke sliding out of his hold. Cockily, Naruto had both of his hands behind his head, grinning now up at the cloudless blue sky. He was humming out a laugh. After a moment, he said, softly. "I'm just happy." He leaned his body over, bumping into Sasuke's shoulder. "I like spending time with you."

Taking the playful shove, Sasuke was at the mercy of his own smile. “Whatever, dumbass,” he deflected.

Another shove, and Sasuke turned to watch him, his grin now softer. Those meaningful ones that Sasuke still found too hard to deal with, sometimes. It was one of those times. Especially when Naruto’s fingers trailed down his forearm, lingering near his wrist until Sasuke caved and let him grab his hand again. He gave a deep, content breath, sighing, but still keeping a careful voice to say, “I think the opening went perfectly, today.”

The writhing bundle of nerves Sasuke had felt but not acknowledged was back, though it was less horrible now that the event was over. Or at least it was for Sasuke. He supposed Naruto might have preferred to be able to stay and watch the patrons for a few more hours, but he chose instead to be by Sasuke’s side. Naruto had made sure that Sasuke’s anxiety hadn’t prevented him from running away from the important occasion, but also was here to accompany him as he left when it became too much. Some things Naruto was smart about. Sasuke grunted in response.

“I think it was pretty brave of you to come,” Naruto said quietly.

Feeling a bit stupid, Sasuke muttered, “Why wouldn’t I come?”

“I don’t know,” Naruto played along, and Sasuke’s face felt hot. Naruto did know. “’Still think it was pretty cool of you to face it.”

“I guess…” he admitted, and Naruto squeezed their hold on each other.

Their linked hands were a comfort Sasuke was starting to get used to. They did it often in secret when it was just them, usually when they were finding their rest together on the safety of the mattress. It was nice being able to do it when there were other people around today, he finally decided to let himself acknowledge. His reputation couldn’t be shaken so easily, anyway. “…You know,” Naruto carefully began, “there’s still a lot of room to work with on the Uchiha land.”

There was. The museum and the temple hardly filled the area much. “Yeah…” Sasuke agreed, wondering where that unpredictable mind was going with it.

“I was thinking,” he continued, and Sasuke might have thrown in a joke about how dangerous that was, had Naruto not sounded so serious. “I mean. Konoha doesn’t have an orphanage inside the village walls.”

An orphanage. Sasuke was glad he hadn’t made the joke.

He hadn’t realized that he stopped walking until Naruto turned back to him. “Um. Well, it’s your land. But I was just thinking, you know, that a lot of kids lost their parents in the war. And- and they’re living on their own, now, which we both know how much that sucks to have to do.”

“Naruto,” Sasuke interrupted him, cutting off his nervous ramblings. “Has anyone ever told you how smart you are?”

Naruto beamed the rest of the way back.

They made it back to the apartment, walking up the stairs to the threshold that Sasuke now considered home. It had taken him a while before Sasuke realized what that apartment had become to him. Apparently, Naruto told him, he had been calling it '*home'* casually in conversation for several months before he had the conscious epiphany about it. Naruto had clocked each time, made sure to not bring attention to the slip up Sasuke hadn't been aware he had made. Naruto told him the first time had been all the way back on Naruto's birthday, which Sasuke still didn't believe. He had no memory of it. Except, vaguely, he did.

It was home, now. Sasuke had a few items inside of it. Some cookware he had purchased, a few outfits in the dresser, ninja tools stored away in the closet. A paper lantern, still on the nightstand. There were other things now that they shared, as well. Pajamas. Shampoo. And the mattress. The safest place Sasuke knew of. It had offered him his first bit of comfort in years, Sasuke's body starving for the relief it gave him. He had found over the past year, though, that not all of the comfort had to do with its plushness; plenty came from the weight next to him that kept him warm.

But the majority of the comfort absolutely did in fact come from the mattress itself, make no mistake.

Two orphans found home together, and now they were going to provide more with the same opportunity. An orphanage. Really, how had the thought never crossed Sasuke's mind? They had made the museum. Anything was possible. He thought back to how much it might have helped him to have had such a place in his youth. How much it would have benefitted Naruto. It was another step in the right direction, one that was absolutely necessary. No child should have to grow up alone. They deserved a home. Sasuke deserved one, too.

As Sasuke pondered over his luck while removing his shoes and cloak at the entrance, these things in life he had stopped believing possible for himself, Naruto bounded forward. He was wearing that pout, those pursed lips that Sasuke could see through clear as day. "What do you want to do," he asked, as if Sasuke couldn't tell exactly what was on his mind. They had the whole day off together for the first time in almost two months, what with the construction going on, and Naruto's shifts on guard duty, and Sasuke still going on expeditions out of country.

Thinking ahead, Sasuke supposed they should probably eat, first. They hadn't had much of a breakfast; Sasuke hadn't the appetite at the time. "Eat lunch," he rejected, just for the time being. He knew neither of them would be able to stave off the inevitable for long.

"Hmm. Right. Lunch," Naruto considered. He couldn't get too disappointed, as the prospect of food was set out for him. He wandered his eyes slyly, going so far as to even glance behind him into the bedroom. "That's not a bad idea. But I was thinking something along the lines of-" His voice cut off in a way that had Sasuke's eyebrows furrowing. It had not cut off in the usual way, trailing off, hinting at something else. He had been cut off by the sight of something, judging by the roundness of his eyes. "Sas-…. Sasuke…"

"What?" Sasuke questioned, a bit concerned at what could take Naruto's mind off of sex like that.

There was a slight tremor to him, barely noticeable. “Is… Is…-” Sasuke was right about to unsheathe his sword and push past him to face whatever threat was in the other room when he finally managed, “Has Teme-chan always had ten legs…?”

Ten-? Sasuke did burst his way into the bedroom, but he did not need his sword. The sight on the bed greeted him. “You dumbass. She just had her kittens.”

“*KITTENS*?!”

What did that idiot think was going to happen? Last month, Sasuke had realized what her growing belly and shortened temper meant. He told an oblivious Naruto, who had just thought his cat was getting fat and was mad about it, as if that was something cats cared about. She was quite clearly pregnant. Sasuke hadn’t thought he needed to explain what that meant, at the time, but apparently Naruto was surprised by the kittens anyway. Sasuke was more concerned with her decision to nest on the mattress, which was now covered with blood. Thankfully the comforter was thick on top, so it probably hadn’t soaked through. Still, he groaned, “Did she have to do it on the bed?”

Naruto was ridiculous. He grabbed Sasuke by the biceps, shaking him. “Sa-Sakura-chan! Get Sakura-chan! We need to- to do something- she needs to go to the hospital- *ahk*!”

A clear, hard slap to the back of his head helped calm him down. “Oi. Shut up. What kind of idiot brings a cat to the hospital?” he scolded. “She doesn’t need help. Cats know how to do this themselves.” Clearly, considering that she managed to give birth to three of them all on her own, already.

“B-But she’s… what do we do?” he asked shakily, still cowering as though Sasuke was going to hit him again.

Clicking his tongue, Sasuke went over to the bed to inspect the kittens. Teme-chan (Sasuke still hated the name, but he had no alternative, and only begrudgingly called her that in his own mind) lifted her head from where she had been cleaning a black and white spotted one, peering up at him with her luminous green eyes. He knew that she wouldn’t attack him, but still offered her his crooked finger to either accept or reject if she wanted. She ignored it, but went back to cleaning herself. He had her trust with them. “They’re fine,” he insisted aloud to Naruto. “Come here.”

Obediently, Naruto pressed up against Sasuke’s back, peering over his shoulder. Sasuke picked the one not currently feeding up, its small body wiggling in his palm. It was mainly black, looking like its mother, save for a white spot on its chest and chin. Judging by the calico one, she had mated with an orange and white tabby. “D-Don’t just pick it up!” Naruto panicked.

Scoffing, Sasuke rolled his eyes, “I told you, they’re fine. Here.” He deposited the kitten into Naruto’s hand, who stared at it for a solid five seconds before panicking again.

“W-Wait! It-It’s too small! I’m gunna break it!”

“You’re not gunna break it.”

“What if- What if I accidentally made a Rasengan right now? Teme-chan would never let me pet her again!”

Ridiculous. “When have you ever *accidentally* made a Rasengan?”

“I don’t know! But what if I did?!”

Huffing, Sasuke made to take the kitten back. “Fine. Give it back then.”

He froze at the prospect, finally looking down at the kitten in his hand. “No,” he said quickly, pulling it back into his chest protectively. Idiot. Looking down into his palm, Naruto commented slowly “…he’s… he’s really cute…” No shit. It was a kitten. Sasuke raised an eyebrow at him. Then Naruto shoved it back to him, a sense of urgency to it. “Wait! Is it a boy?”

He was still sore about having misgendered Teme-chan for months. Rolling his eyes again, Sasuke lifted its tail. It was hard to tell with how it was wiggling, and that was a difficult thing to determine with kittens so young, and Sasuke had never claimed to be a cat expert, anyway. “I think so.”

“Hah!” he cheered, as if guessing the right gender of a kitten was something to win at. “And that one’s a boy, too, right?”

He had pointed to the calico. “No,” Sasuke said.

“You didn’t even check!”

“It’s a calico,” Sasuke explained. Judging by Naruto’s expression, it wasn’t enough, so he added, “Male calicos are extremely rare.”

“So it *can* be a boy!”

Of course he had to try to take the chance that he was right. Scoffing, Sasuke lifted that one’s tail. “Girl.” Naruto started muttering darkly, holding the black kitten to his chest, which was mewling in a way that had Teme-chan glaring at him. She hadn’t officially extended her trust to Naruto, per say. “Can you give me that one back, now? It might be hungry.”

He pouted as though Sasuke had said something unfair, but handed the kitten back for Sasuke to place near its mother’s belly. “We should name them!” Naruto switched topics, perking up. “Um, that one should be- what- *WHAT IS SHE DOING*?!”

Teme-chan had lifted her leg. “She’s having another kitten,” Sasuke explained the obvious.

“IS- IS THAT-?! Ew.”

Sasuke snapped at him, “Don’t say ‘*ew’*.”

“It’s gross! It’s…” he looked green.

“Don’t faint.”

“I’m not gunna *faint*! It’s just gross!” As if Naruto hadn’t seen grosser things on the battlefield before. His attitude flipped to amusement on a dime. “Whoa, it just pops out like that, huh?” Then back to disgust. “Ew, is she eating that?!”

Annoyed, Sasuke sighed, “Naruto, go make some tea.”

Confused, Naruto asked, “What do you need tea for?”

“I need it. Go boil some water, and make a pot of tea,” he commanded again. Naruto dutifully went into the kitchen, too easily fooled into thinking he was doing something important. Sasuke sighed, looking down at the now four kittens nestled into Teme-chan’s belly. She had taken to childbirth quite easily, it seemed. He wondered if it was her first litter.

Now with Naruto out of the room, Teme-chan focused her attention back on Sasuke. He doubted she wanted to be pet; it was more like she was sharing her exasperation of Naruto’s loudness with him. Perhaps she was angry with Sasuke for letting him get as loud as he had been around her kittens. If that was so, Sasuke should apologize. She went back to cleaning the new mess.

He took in the state of the bed. They would have to buy a new comforter. The spare in the closet would do for tonight. And they would have to move Teme-chan and her kittens. They had bought her her own bed months ago, which she rarely used. She also had a cardboard box in the corner Sasuke had *hoped* she would have chosen to nest in, but of course not. Sasuke couldn’t blame her for preferring the mattress. She was bound to bring them back up onto it during the day.

When Naruto came back, he yelled at Sasuke for drinking the tea that was supposed to be for Teme-chan. But Sasuke had never said that the tea was for the cat. What would a cat need tea for? And then Naruto yelled at him again. Sasuke told him the plans for moving the kittens to the box for the night, and Naruto pouted. “Can we move them now? I wanted to kiss you on here…”

Idiot. Sasuke shook his head. “She wouldn’t be happy if we did that.”

Huffing, Naruto bent over him, pulling his face in close to mumble lowly, so that his lips brushed over Sasuke’s, offering, “We could take a bath.”

This close, Sasuke couldn’t deny the kiss. He was bound to the electricity of it, like a magnet. Inevitable. His body, so sore from the day’s emotions, began to melt under his lips. Weakness, but it wasn’t weakness at all. The kittens on the bed did provide a bit of a problem…

“Lunch,” Sasuke pulled back, bringing himself into his right mind.

“*You can eat after watching that*?!”

They had time.

_o-O-o_

Chapter End Notes

i can't believe we are finally done!! what am i going to hyperfocus all of my time on now?!?!?

thank you to every single one of you who stuck this through to the end! when writing this, i had been so engrossed in it, and it was such a solitary experience. getting to finally share it with everyone and for everyone to be SO damn kind with reviews and kudos is the wildest thing to me. reading comments every day was SUCH a serotonin boost! so extra thank you to everyone who commented, especially everyone reading who doesn't even have english as a first language, and traversed into our awful language to tell me you loved the fic. that's insane to me! but even if you just passively read, thank you as well!

if any of y'all have a tumblr, meet up with me over there if you want to talk more or if you are one of those sasuke-has-nothing-to-apologize-for champions. i'm over on sasubaeuchithot.tumblr.com!!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!